

The State is the King: A Marxist Approach to Sophocles' *Antigone*

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Abstract

Marxist approach enunciates that economic and sociopolitical realities are the actual factors that outline the human experience and the economy has a pivotal role to play in all aspects of life. Marxism also concentrates upon the conception that individual experiences are based upon the socioeconomic systems which also shape the behavior of the groups. It questions the perception that gaining and retaining political and economic power is the motivating drive behind all political and social activities. In other words, economics lays the foundation of social, political, and ideological realities. It also affects human perception and develops a perspective. Antigone is a major tragedy by Sophocles. Sophocles has discussed the perception of human nature throughout his plays and he has dealt with various aspects of human life. Likewise, many critics have analyzed his plays from a myriad of lenses and perspectives. Eagleton (1976) also emphasizes the convoluted interrelationships between the socio-economic base and the social institutions and values (including literature) which make the superstructure. Winnington Ingram (1980) also acknowledges the obscurity in deriving meaning in Antigone. Several critics have focused their attention on its sociopolitical aspects, which include the desirable degree of respect to established law, and the relationship based on gender, and preference of the duties toward the family on the duty to social laws. The present study aims at exploring the considerations (mainly economic, and political) behind the perpetuation of authority and exhibiting the role of gender and class in the hegemony of the domineering over the meek in the play, Antigone, and also tries to uncover the role of ideology in fashioning the attitude of the subjugated to be tyrannized and how the oppressor subdues the mindfulness of the outranked. The study also intended to corroborate that Sophocles antedated the Marxist principles.

Keywords: Class, sociopolitical, injustice, Woman, ideology, Power

Introduction

Antigone, a marvelous play by Sophocles has inspired a host of writers, readers, and critics to comment upon it. Nobody can escape reflecting upon the delightful piece of literature. Sophocles' *Antigone* is a magnificent creation which, despite the winds of time has enthused generations to come and it, having thematic concerns ahead of time will always appeal to the masses universally. The present study is an attempt to make an in-depth study of *Antigone*, a tragedy based on an antediluvian Greek myth. Antigone makes an impetuous decision to follow the voice of her heart and conscience as it refutes to King Creon's proclamation, announcing the denial of the customary burial of her brother, Polyneices. The story leads to unkind, abrupt, and widespread consequences of Antigone's resolution which the king is forced to come across. Antigone upholds the spiritual tradition and refuses to surrender before the man-made statue and accepts a noble death (1972). According to Jajja (2013), the ideology is manipulated by the rulers, and the belief systems of culture are formed to protect the political interests of the ruling class. The present study intends to investigate the instigating forces and considerations (mainly economic, material, and political) behind the maintenance of power and to demonstrate the role

of gender and class in the supremacy of the powerful over the less powerful or weaker, and also try to unearth the role of ideology in changing the mindset of the oppressed to be oppressed.

Research Methodology

The present study is grounded upon the exhaustive analysis of the text in the light of Marxist principles to prove the basic proposition of the study that the power game is based on the social, political, and economic exploitation of the masses. The free will of the public is repressed in the name of ideology, religion, class, gender, and age. The study also intends to uncover the way rulers, the men in power, rule and colonize the consciousness of the masses in order to rationalize their rule. It also focuses on the manipulation and exploitation of the social institutions by the powerful to achieve their ends as portrayed in *Antigone* by Sophocles. The study intends to verify the proposition that the play reinforces the Marxist ideas regarding the class structure. The study also intends to prove that socioeconomic factors play an essential role in shaping public opinion.

The following research questions are formulated in keeping with the propositions made by Tyson (2006) to make the study concentrated and directed:

- 1) Does the play reinforce the idea of keeping and maintaining power through social, economic, and political activities?
- 2) Does the play uphold the notion that differences in the socioeconomic class divide people more significantly than differences in race, or gender?
- 3) Does the role of ideology contribute to the empowerment of the rulers in maintaining their authority in the play?

Literature Review

Antigone has attracted a host of critics and literary theorists. For centuries, the play has been read and re-read. Critics have been inferring new aspects and exploring new dimensions of meaning. It has attracted the readers universally. *Antigone* was written approximately twenty-five hundred years ago. But its appeal never stopped. Critics interpret it through various lenses and using multiple critical glasses. It has been interpreted using different literary parameters. *Antigone* has arrested the attention of Feminist theorists. It has also captured the interest of Psychoanalyst critics. Much has been discussed about *Antigone*. Adequate background literature is presented to explain the theoretical backbone of my paper and it also lays bare the foundation of the stance of the researcher. *Antigone* by Sophocles is characterized by various themes which include desire, and transgression, and betrayal, *Antigone* reverberates across centuries and it has given birth to political discourse. The most recent criticism is discussed to support and provide justification for the study. The criticism will also stand as a theoretic framework for my study.

Beauvoir (1974) noted that women are considered “other” in Hegel’s work. Mary Dietz (1985) criticizes the social feminists regarding *Antigone* as a heroine of the polis by giving her the status of citizenship. It undermines the role of women and marginalizes them. Elshtain (1980) posits modern and contemporary feminists as “daughters of *Antigone*”. He viewed *Antigone* as representative of women who can voice their opinion when the interests of the family are at stake. According to Mills (1996), her actions bring into question the strict division between the Oikos and the polis. *Antigone* is usually viewed as preferring the family interest to state laws and she actually wants the issue to the public’s attention. Mills (1996) suggest that *Antigone* assumes the role of a political activist when she raised her voice in public and defied her role only in the private and domestic sphere. George Steiner (1996) views *Antigone* in terms of the brother-sister relationship. (Holland, 1998) being a modern reader and interpreter of *Antigone*

stresses the fact the Antigone is unlike us. Holland admonishes readers while using ancient texts it is necessary to be more cautious and careful because the past is used to uphold political arguments of the present day. Walsh (1999) suggests that Antigone represents the limits of the symbolic order in Lacanian perspective to Antigone. Antigone as an individual voices her opinion to serve the interests of her family, which is taken as woman participation in the politics of the day. Antigone's action seems to question the status quo and struggle to bring change in society. Antigone is an individual whose actions shake the foundation of authoritative and patriarchal laws. According to Butler (2000), the acts of Antigone are direct consequences of the death of Polyneices and the tragic and saddening tale of her family. Her actions challenge the tyrannical rules and laws of society. In Antigone's Claim, Butler (2000) declares Antigone undergoes the vagueness of social values and also its norms. She challenges and questions the human laws in comparison with the Divine laws. The political interests are compromised when it is a matter of public interest. Butler (2000) puts gender based on social and cultural influences. He refutes that it can be attributed to binaries.

Butler (2000) and Nussbaum (1996) hold a belief that Antigone's action is her struggle for subjectivity and they also believe that Antigone is in a conflict between the laws of the state and the domestic duty. Helene Foley (2001) describes the mourning practices as "potentially revolutionary," (p. 33) as Antigone practices it. He continues adding that on occasions of funerals and burials the public and private interests often merge. Nussbaum (2001) notes that both Creon and Antigone are unyielding, obstinate and occupy opposing positions. McRobbie (2004a) shows that Butler's Antigone's claim is also a claim for seriousness and radicality in family life, sexuality, and also in political culture. (McRobbie, 2004a, p. 509) Like Elshtain, Nelson Reddick (2004) is also of the view that Antigone is the embodiment of the importance of females who can verbalize publicly to explain the position of the family. McRobbie (2004a, 2004b) views Butler's (1997, 2000) reading of Antigone as putting important questions whether or how these articulations of post-feminism indicate broader social and policy trends. According to Rabinowitz (2008) Creon in *Antigone*, along with Oedipus in *Oedipus*, and Theseus in *Hippolytus* are inclined toward hubris and arrogance. These are the qualities of the tyrant.

The criticism shows that often Antigone has been interpreted by critics of all ages and by the most recent ages. Each reading gives Antigone a fresh reading experience. Most of the time, the story has been interpreted from Antigone's perspective as an individual, or a young girl who refuses to conform to the norms and rules of society and turns out to be a rebellious individual with freedom. It has also been discussed Antigone as an opposing agent against the tyrannical rule of Creon. Very few attempts have been made to interpret and read the story with a perspective that centers on the character of Creon. The researcher, identifying the gaps, and room for further exploration has endeavored to uncover features of class struggle and a conflict between characters and adverse circumstances. The study has also focused on the sociopolitical and socioeconomic factors influencing the lives of the individuals.

The present study aims at exploring the instigating forces and concerns (mainly economic, and political) behind safeguarding of power and demonstrating the role of gender, race, and class in the supremacy of the powerful over the less powerful or weaker, and uncovering the role of ideology in changing the mindset of the oppressed to be oppressed and the subjects to be ruled.

Discussion and Analysis

Creon and the Power Game

The powerful rulers exploit the oppressed and marginalized people. Women represent the marginalized strata of society. Every possible effort is done by the powerful Creon to empower himself. Most of the dialogues of Creon revolve around the idea of power and its maintenance. His verdict to leave Polyneices unburied is also an attempt to keep his power intact. He replaces Oedipus' sons as a ruler and comes up as a tyrant who will not leave any stone unturned to maintain his power and justify his rule. He also tries to influence public opinion by lending ears to Chorus which represents the general public. He uses all possible means to let the people know about his powers. He wishes to be a person, with the notion (as Antigone puts it) to rule not only living but also dead that lies with gods. His powers know no limits. He tries to rationalize his decisions by suppressing the voice of sense. There is no ruler upon Creon to put check on his powers. Right after succeeding to the throne, he tries to control the voice of the masses. In his conversation with the Chorus, he pretends to be democratic but actually, he wants them to be persuaded by his authority, if not by logic. The approach of Creon toward the power of the crown changes drastically when the body of Polynices is buried. The conflict between Antigone and Creon takes the form of power letting loose its grip upon the subjects. And Creon doesn't want to be influenced either by listening to Antigone's arguments regarding the Divine laws related to dead persons. He fails to think of somebody other than a powerful King. Creon wants to suppress Antigone, as her defiance will lead to his politically dwindling control upon the subordinates. He can't tolerate being defeated by a mere woman (weaker sex). A Greek aristocratic man always wishes his people to be supported by him, he also wants to help his friends and destroy his enemies. It is also a fact that he could not bear it if he was being mocked.

As a true politician, he tries to have the ears of the people in order to win their support. Chorus also fails to back Antigone by calling that they are not familiar with the behavioral changes of great (powerful) men. Creon also reminds Tiresias that he must not forget that he is talking to the King (Powerful, and authoritative). He thinks it beyond his powers to be persuaded by his subjects either by Tiresias or by Antigone. Haemon and Chorus are also unable to make him round. The argument between Creon and his son Haemon takes the form of a heated quarrel in Antigone. Chorus suggests to Creon that it is human to make a mistake and it is not disgraceful to recognize and correct it.

Creon tries to win the hearts of his people by using slogans like traitor, defiant, man-woman conflict (to keep the patriarchal rules), and also patriotism. Ismene is so afraid of Creon's edifice that she doesn't dare to think of violating the powerful king and obsessed with the idea of the risk involved in the burial venture undertaken by Antigone. Creon also plays with the ideals of patriotism and justifies his decree of leaving Polyneices' body decay. He also warns people that anyone going against his decision will also be deemed to be a traitor and disloyal. Creon pleads his case before Chorus and tries to win their support by arousing fear among people. Creon is infuriated by the remarks made by Choragus that it might be the act of some god to bury the dead body. He is of the view that gods will not honor and favor the insolence of destroying their temples. Creon, in his fury and rashness, turns suspicious about the act of burial and unfolds the role of money which corrupts human beings, and makes honest and fair people forced to be unfair and dishonest. Antigone disrespects Creon that he is a fool if he thinks that the death sentence while burying my brother reduces my suffering in lieu of adding into it. Creon is infuriated by the response of Antigone on death sentence and says that her insolent behavior proves him at the place of a woman (weak) and her at the place of man (powerful). Creon misreads the situation and mistakes both sisters, Antigone and Ismene for eying upon his throne

(power) through defiance and not yielding to his orders. He sees the threat to his crown. Creon believes that death terrifies even men (who are powerful) and these women (not powerful) will also be scared of death. Haemon tells Creon that being powerful is not a guarantee of power over the reason. Even the talk of the less powerful is full of sense and it is up to the sensible to get some sense out of it. Creon snubs Choragus on justifying Haemon and says angrily that for an experienced and seasoned man like him, it is incorrect to be swayed and seduced by mere a boy. Creon's tyranny assumes the extreme form and he boasts that the people of the city are nobody to propose and suggest to him how to rule them and maintain his authority.

Creon continues saying that the state is represented by King and King's decree must be reverend and it must stand supreme. Creon disrespects Tiresias and asserts his power and authority as a king by reminding him that he must not forget that he was talking to his king. Each step he takes is to justify his rule upon people and he rationalizes his rule by exploiting his subordinates politically, socially, and also economically which is rooted in the Marxist school of thought.

Division of Socioeconomic class, race, and gender

The class system is a key idea in the theory of Marxism and it is the base word in the Marxist school of thought. It has been found through a deliberate and thorough study of the play that differences of race and gender are instrumental in the social construction of human behavior and the upbringing of human thoughts. Human thinking is influenced by the ideas of genetic transmission and also reflects the biased attitude of Greek society on the basis of gender. The study also reflects how women are stereotyped as less powerful and marginalized in comparison with men who hold the authority to control women and seduction and the temptation of any kind is prohibited. Their role in intellectual discussion is undermined. The idea of race and genetics haunts characters which also enforces the class structure and questions the identity of the individuals. The study also shows that race and gender classified differences are also socioeconomic in nature and they hover throughout the story. We see that Ismene is reluctant to help Antigone out of fear as she thinks that being a woman, though from a royal family, makes her less powerful as compared to men who hold all power and authority. She also takes Creon's laws seriously and she is convinced of the strength of authoritarian Creon and doesn't possess the valor required to violate the powerful Creon's laws. Creon takes the Chorus into confidence and makes them aware that his royal blood makes him a justifiable candidate for king and all powers associated with it. He is boastful about enjoying the full authority of the city after the killing of the princes against each other. Choragus expresses his feelings regarding Antigone how her father's genetics has affected her and says that her pride reminds her of her father who never yielded and surrendered in the most adverse circumstances. Creon asks Chorus to keep an eye on the behavior of the women, Antigone who has lost her sense of reason, and also Ismene who was always stupid and lacked sense. Creon also discards the idea of marrying his sons to the defiant daughters who proved to be bad and wicked girls after violating his orders. This is very painful for Creon that his edict has been challenged by a mere woman, though heard by all people of the city (including men). He considers it beyond the dignity of a King to be influenced by family ties or race if they commit a crime. The punishment will make others obey the king otherwise the forgiveness or ignoring it will lead people to disobedience. Only in this way, he may assert his authority and maintain power. Creon gets irrational in his debate with Haemon and seems to lose reason that just and unjust laws must not be violated by the subordinates when the proclamation is made by the one in authority. It is the duty of the public to obey all kinds of

laws. Creon takes it as a man's weakness to be convinced by mere a woman (less powerful). According to Creon, dignity lies in being defeated by a man who is more powerful and stronger than a woman. Antigone transgresses her limits and doesn't conform to the values of ideological femininity. Haemon pleads the case of Antigone and makes every possible effort to convince his father that the people of Thebes fully support Antigone's action which deserves applause and honors for burying his brother in spite of the fact that she was a woman. Creon repeatedly says that the words of a woman are being spoken through the tongue of Haemon and he is haunted by a woman, and despite giving ears to his arguments, he is insistent upon the idea of the seduction of a woman who has overpowered his son completely. Chorus associates Antigone's punishment as a succession of suffering and curse brought upon her father, Oedipus. The study focuses on the notion of how socioeconomic differences construct human thought and determine the role of marginalized and oppressed strata of society on the basis of stereotypical behavior. It also proves the fact that socioeconomic systems shape the psychological experience and behavior of the masses.

The role of ideology in Antigone

An ideology binds a society into a unit. It unites them politically. It also deals with social, cultural, emotional, moral, and as the name suggests idealistic aspects of life. In my paper, I have discussed various tools and slogans the oppressor uses to rationalize his rule and maintain his supremacy upon the subordinates. Ideology is the greatest weapon used by the ruler to justify his rule and unjust laws. Ideology protects the political and personal interests of the rulers. An ideology makes people subjects and they willingly accept themselves as subjects. Ideology assumes various forms in Antigone and Creon exploits Theban people in different ways in the name of various ideologies. Ideology plays a pivotal role in shaping the identity and being the most acceptable form of rationalization of tyrannical and despotic rule. Ideology gives justification to even unjust and unlawful rules and rationalizes unjust laws and people are forced to accept these laws as norms and values of society. It empowers rulers and helps them maintain their rule for a longer period of time. Creon exchanges his role as per the situation demands. In his discussion with Haemon, he assumes the role of father and keeps his tone moderate. And when he observes Haemon justifying Antigone's behavior and going against him, his tone changes and he uses the long-held belief (common to Greek society) of prejudice against women as being wicked, and bad. He remains servile and soft with Tiresias, and suddenly his tone changes and he reminds him that he is his king. He is found to snub Choragos when he tries to pacify Creon and listen politely to Haemon. Throughout the play, we find multiple references to the gods, justice, law, rule, obedience, and gender-based prejudice. The most dominant idea he uses to justify his authority is justice. He wants to ensure that his family-ties don't affect him as a just ruler. The idea of justice best serves his ends. He wants his subjects to be obedient and loyal. The incidents of the story unfold that he is not willing to be defeated by a mere woman. Creon, in his conversation with Haemon, says that it is his right to do justice. In response to a question from Choragos, Creon says that nobody will support the person who violates the law. Creon exploits the ideal of law as supreme and uses it masterfully. Creon furiously discards the idea of Choragos by saying that gods will not favor the person who destroys the state and violates its laws. Antigone fails to fit herself in the ideal role of ideological femininity. Creon angrily expresses that out of all people, it was Antigone who violated the law and showed irreverence to the judicial system. He also says that it is obligatory for the subjects to obey all laws whether

they are just or unjust. He is of the view that in order to keep our lives disciplined, we need laws and they must not be violated.

He also exploits people's feelings of patriotism and says that Polyneices being responsible for destroying our city was a traitor and he will not be honored with the customary burial. He discourages anybody giving him burial will be a traitor and will violate the law of the land. He also expresses that the state is kingly and his rules are the state's laws so for people King is the state, and his laws must be obeyed.

Creon is also found to exploit the idea of misogyny in Greek society. He says that he will not allow a woman to defeat him, and it is beyond his dignity as a man to be overpowered by a woman. However, he would prefer to be overwhelmed by a man who is stronger than a woman. He also snubs his son Haemon to rationalize and plead for Antigone, a wicked girl who defiled against the state. He says that his son has been captured by the weak passions for women, and he is completely haunted by a wicked woman. Creon, a manifestation of the ruling class discourages conflicting opinions and rebuffs everybody who challenges or questions his authority as a king.

Conclusion

The study has demonstrated that *Antigone* fortifies the basic notions of the Marxist school of thought that socioeconomic factors are instrumental in making and shaping public opinions and they are mainly involved in the lives of people in affecting them socially, economically, politically, intellectually, and psychologically. It has also proven that a powerful segment of the society discourages the lower strata of society and affects them politically, and makes every effort to keep their rule and maintain their supremacy. It depicts the story mainly from Creon's perspective and the study highlights various aspects of the play. It has also focused on the idea of the way irrational rule, and unjust laws are rationalized to serve the ends of the ruling class. It has also demonstrated the role of ideology and its various forms used manipulatively by the powerful and privileged class to keep the lower classes marginalized and oppressed. It has also shown that the political interests of the ruling class are achieved through multiple ideas and ideals. Creon suppresses not only Antigone but also Chorus which represents the collective character and the subjects at the same time through his manipulative role as a tyrant ruler. The study has also touched upon the role of race, gender, patriotism, law, and religion in affecting and influencing the lives of various characters. The study paves ways to unearth the genetically transmitted behaviors in human beings.

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