



---

## Existential Dilemmas and Societal Struggles: A Critical Exploration of Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*

Dr. Rajni Kant Goswami, Associate Professor,  
Sri Aurobindo College (Eve)  
(University of Delhi)

**Abstract:** Jean Anouilh's reworking of Sophocles's much acclaimed tragedy *Antigone* has imbued the old classic with contemporaneity and contextualized the Oedipus myth in modern spatio-temporal settings. It succinctly captures the essence of contemporary anxieties, inequities and political uncertainties that mar the modern world. The adaptation immensely enriches the original by infusing variegated shades of compassion, familial love, avuncular care and most importantly 'plurality of voices and consciousnesses' as Bakhtin would prefer to put it. The present article is a sincere attempt to probe Anouilh's *Antigone* for its blending of two disparate world interweaving Greek myth with World War II French political landscape. The study also aims to examine similarities and variance with regard to different dramatic elements in Anouilh's *Antigone* vis-à-vis the Greek classic.

**Keywords:** Theatricalism, existential aporia, defamiliarise, plurality of voices, ritualistic burial, propensity of martyrdom, absurdism

The Greek playwrights are verily considered as the inventors of tragedies, comedies and other forms of drama. If Thespis often credited to be the father of tragedy and investing the chorus with the narrative voice, Aeschylus another notable playwright of 5th century BC, added one more character to the stage and made the spectacle more performative and action oriented. It then allowed the playwrights to place their characters reasoning out on the stage or to work out their inner conflicts. Sophocles, the greatest tragedian of the Greek times, made the play even more theatrical and complex by incorporating the third character which then catapulted tragedy into the best expressive performative art of the time.

Jean Marie Pierre Anouilh the great French playwright was born in 1910 in Bordeaux France. Later, his family relocated to Paris for better employment and education opportunities. 'Siegfried' a play by Jean Giraudoux proved to be an inflection point in Anouilh's life where he discovered his passion for dramatic art. His plays exuded the essence of 'theatricalism' which foregrounded poetry and imagination, the quintessence of drama, before other elements. His oeuvre of drama included not only the modern comedies and tragedies but it also ranged from Greek myths to ballet comedy. Notably, his adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone* shot him instantly into spotlight and earned him undying international acclaim. His adaptation is also viewed as the exposition of his idea of tragedy. He dwells vividly on the concept of tragedy and distinguishes it from melodrama. For him tragedy is 'clean', 'restful' and 'flawless'. Even the arguments which take place on the stage are 'kingly' and 'gratuitous'.

Chorus, the oldest element of the stage also underwent a great change over a few decades of 5th century BC in ancient Greece. Initially confined to the activities like dancing and singing, Chorus incrementally became the most indispensable agency on the stage. It not only catered to the musical aesthetics of the audience but rather represented the populace on the stage per



---

se. It also acted as a bridge between the masked characters on the stage and the audience; It gave the spectators a sense of being included or represented in the play. The audience could easily connect with the chorus as it represented the common ethos and the religious sensibility of the time. But the chorus of the Anouilh's tragedy is the modern version of the older chorus. Keeping the audience in view, Anouilh felt that Sophoclean chorus represented only the archaic social structure which became virtually redundant and unrelatable to the modern audience. Anouilh made sure the choral addresses in the adaptation are more direct and succinct and well suited to the modern sensibility. There is less verbosity or element of circumlocution in Anouilh's chorus.

Anouilh's choral speeches inform the audience about what plot holds for them and how actions are going to be unfolded. If Sophoclean audience knew the Oedipal myth by heart, yet enjoyed the play with awe and disbelief, Anouilh's chorus engages with the audience *tete-a-tete* and reveals the story in a matter-of-fact but interesting way. Right with the first appearance of chorus, spectators knew Antigone is going to die as chorus proclaims with its emphatic flourish, "You die when your name is Antigone". Anouilh does not condemn or control the actions of Antigone in the play unlike the classical chorus did. Readers observe a paradigmatic shift in the choral response to the question of divinity or religious dilemma in the play. The modern chorus, as the true representative of the twentieth century audience, saves the people from a lot of banality or inanity of invoking gods or placing blame on them or the 'stars' for all catastrophic events unfolding on the stage.

Apart from the chorus, Anouilh's *Antigone* departs from its Greek original in many other ways. In Oedipal trilogy, Tiresias was delineated as the conscience keeper, a loyal advisor and a well wisher of the state. In French adaptation, the blind prophet is conspicuously absent from the scene. Unlike Greek plot where Tiresias' clairvoyance moves the action, Antigone's decisions and choices become paramount in the modern version. Anouilh also adds the character of nurse which endows his work with warmth and maternal affection. It also provides more depth and rootedness to Antigone's character and enables readers to understand her better. Besides, it also renders the adaptation with a more humane and realistic touch.

Another noteworthy shift the readers encounter, is in the delineation of characters. Anouilh adroitly invests his personages with the human qualities and attributes which make them endearing and difficult to forget. Even after reading the play, one gets haunted by the images of a concerned uncle attempting to reason out with his niece in order to circumvent the catastrophe. Creon's character remodeled on the classical one is more lifelike, striking chords at once with the readers and the audience. He seems to be imbued with fatherly emotions. He also comes across as a concerned guardian, conscientious man, dutiful statesman and a thorough gentleman. He beseeches Antigone to give up on her futile mission. He laments, "Don't make me add your life to the payment. I have paid enough" (36). He feels more like a saviour struggling with the mission to rescue Antigone from her tragic fate but fails miserably as the Oedipal cycle was inexorable and only role the individuals had, was to play out their parts.

In the classical tragedy, Creon looks shorn of any compassion or pity and was unrelenting in his moral or kingly obligations. He comes across as a dry, pedantic, irascible and a flat character, devoid of any tangible human emotions. On the contrary, Anouilh's Creon is a well rounded, humane, rational and balanced character with endearing qualities. Sometimes it



---

gives out an impression as if Anouilh is favoring Nazi occupation as Creon symbolically stands for German power. Assessing Creon's character using the principles of Aristotle's Poetics, one might conclude that he is indubitably a tragic hero. His predicament and struggles are not only within but also without. He not only contrives to safeguard Thebes from external aggression of Argos but also tries to save royal family's honour and integrity. Both his nephews were a "a pair of blackguards". Eteocles was no less rotten than Polynices. Creon laments, "Two gangsters were more a luxury than I could afford" (40). Proclaiming Eteocles as a war hero was Creon's hopeless attempt to, at least, redeem his family's declining reputation as much as he could. Out of all the characters, he is the only one who seems most keen on avoiding the catastrophe. As soon as Creon learns about the 'ritualistic sprinkling of dust' on Polynices body, he hopes it was some 'dog' who has done it. He even commands his guards not to reveal it to any other citizen. Similarly, he assures Antigone to overlook her commission of offence and tries hard to persuade her to choose life over death. His philosophy of embracing life as it comes and find happiness in it, resembles Albert Camus' concept of absurdism where mythological figure Sisyphus, doomed to push the boulder uphill, still feels happy about it. Even Antigone's calling him 'impotent' does not affront him or make him lose his calm (42). But incrementally, Creon exhibits some shades of negativity by flatly dismissing Antigone's viewpoint and turning the wheel of destruction, pain and sufferings.

Most of all, Antigone represents indefatigable spirit of a young modern mind who wants to create her destiny and follow her heart's calling without any shred of qualms. Before embarking on the dangerous mission, she takes a glance of the paper flower gifted to her by Polynices and draws her strength and courage from it. It demonstrates that Antigone prioritizes family and sisterly love against any political or social decree. Her life philosophy is in complete contradiction with Creon's views. She exudes the confidence of a go-getter and does not wish to be only a passive agency. She aspires to lead a life where she has the power to shape it "on the principles of firm conviction and all encompassing love" (42). Her energy and gumption is contagious as it affects her otherwise indifferent sister Ismene. Ismene seems to have internalized the fear of authority and was terrified of the power structure in the beginning, but as the tragedy progresses she sheds her ambivalence and resolves to stand against Creon. She dares to challenge Creon to punish her as well along with Antigone. She says, "Creon! If you kill her, you will have to kill me too. I was with her. I helped her bury Polynices" (59). Both sisters verily represent two ends of a spectrum symbolising different approaches vis-à-vis adherence to state laws. The 'howling mob', 'thousand arms', 'thousand eyes' and 'thousands swarming the streets'- all are the symbols of state's might and amply demonstrate how state could use its 'forces' termed as 'Repressive state apparatus' by Louis Althusser to deal with the dissenting individuals.

While comparing the classic with its French adaptation, Pipelzadeh observes that essentially it is the element of suffering that sets protagonists of both the tragedies apart. Sophocles' Antigone perseveres through a treacherous path to fulfill her sisterly and filial obligations. Antigone in French adaptation on other hand, passes through her ordeals and immeasurable sufferings to reconcile with her inner self. Her commitment to justice, tenacity of purpose and steely resolve is reminiscent of her father, King Oedipus himself.

Some readers find Anouilh's Antigone extravagantly self-sacrificing throwing all cautions to air. The logic extended by her to vindicate her position, also appears flawed and absurd. Scholars wonder even about the motive that propels her to take such an extreme step. She



---

could have easily withdrawn or distanced herself from the unsavoury and perilous expedition. Studying about the propensity to self-sacrifice or attain martyrdom, Bélanger observes, “People who are ready to suffer or die for their convictions risk being labeled as eccentrics, if not lunatics. However, it need not be the case that these individuals are disconnected from reality” (496). She further posits that sometimes people who otherwise appear normal may take ‘shocking and horrific’ steps. The study undertaken by Bélanger et al also found that spirit of self-sacrifice was a good indicator of altruism. Frankl another researcher articulates the similar view- “Commitment to a higher cause infuse meaning in people’s life” (27).

The stage of 20<sup>th</sup> Century France, departs considerably from the time Sophocles enacted his tragedies for the Greek annual festival Dionysia. Characters sporting stock masks and possessed by the ecstatic frenzy of the carnival, reflected the social, communal and religious euphoria of the time. This classic carnivalesque and euphoric celebration had no place in modern drama as the audience now hails from a completely different socio-cultural milieu. Anouilh however, imbues his personages as well as the social settings with spatio-temporal flavour of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He rather appropriates the historical anxiety and existential aporia into creating a tragedy resonant more with turbulent times of WWII and connected only loosely with its Greek namesake. The overshadowing effects of determinism and divine finality is less emphatic in modern version except the time when chorus in the prologue proclaims with credo and pomposity “you die when your name is Antigone” (3). Discussing about tragic and inevitable fate of Antigone, Brook writes, “Antigone’s pains and sufferings begin by her birth, when she is born as result of the incestuous adultery of Oedipus and his mother” (11).

When the tragedy *Antigone* was enacted on the stage whether for the Athenian audience or for the French, the tragic myth of Oedipal cycle was already a part of their collective memories. So the playwrights of both ages were confronted with a formidable task as to how they can defamiliarise what has already been a well known and popular Greek myth. Hence, the playwrights needed to demonstrate their inventiveness and ingenuity while attempting to preserve the basic structure and essential ingredients of the myth. Ancient dramatists achieved this feat by investing their plots with unique and radical innovations that often left their audience much shocked. The spectators encountered the dramatist’s cunning when they expected it the least. It also endowed these tragedies with freshness and novelty and made it more saleable. Anouilh accomplishes this seemingly onerous project by reworking holistically almost on all aspect of theatre.

Historically, when Sophocles was writing *Antigone*, the first play of Oedipal trilogy, Athens was besieged by turmoil, violence and revolt. It is believed that the character of Creon was loosely modelled on historic Greek statesman ‘Pericles’. Stressing on the duties of citizens in Athenian state, Pericles wrote in his panegyric speech, “Each individual is interested not only in his own affairs but in the affairs of city as well” (25). Through his speech, Pericles underscored ‘larger good’ of the community and placed it on same pedestal with individual welfare. He expected all and sundries to raise themselves above egoistic considerations and ruminate how they could contribute towards larger national good.

Anouilh wrote his magnum opus *Antigone* during the Normandy annexation by Nazis forces. It is generally believed that the protagonist Antigone is an embodiment of French resistance during the World War II. It was also written as a critique of Vichy government by Marshal Pétain. Kazmi writes, “Anouilh wrote and produced *Antigone* during the second world war





---

and he revised this play as a protest against the fascist regime in France, imposed by Hitler after his army occupied the country during the Second World War” (141). The French audience instantly identified themselves with Antigone who articulated her resentment vociferously and her rebellion against repressive power was viewed to be analogous to the French resistance against Nazis. The tragedy was allowed to be enacted by the German forces as they believed that some of Creon’s speeches favoured their occupation of France and furthered their interest.

Antigone, a rebel against the state authorities, threatens to disturb the delicate balance between individual and the state. She defies the royal decree despite being fully conscious of dire consequences. It also alludes to biblical parable of David (2 Samuel 12) and Goliath, Creon epitomising the absolute power of state on one hand and Antigone emblematic of free will and unflinching courage of a common citizen on the other. Antigone is loath to acquiesce to any despotic state power which does not care to deign to consider an individual’s dignity.

In the old classic, Antigone draws her courage from familial ties and ‘divine law’ and in modern adaptation, her indomitable, tenacious spirit propel her perilous actions. She is indifferent to the fact if Polynices was a heroic figure or a traitor. She even agrees with Creon that ritualistic burial of a corpse is an absurd act devoid of any meaning when Creon says, “burial ceremony is ridiculous passport, this litany of gibberish, that you would’ve been the first to be ashamed of, if you had seen it performed” (32). Anouilh’s Antigone silently agrees to Creon’s calling Polynices “a vicious, soulless little carnivore” (39) as she herself had seen him inebriated and returning in the wee hours after a night of revelry.

Both tragedies run through the inexorable Oedipal cycle fraught with torments, horrors and agonizing filial love. Antigone singing her own funeral dirge in the original play is both heart-rending and depressing. Towards the end Antigone addresses dead Polynices through her soliloquy and affirms her unflinching love towards him. She unequivocally proclaims that she would not have sacrificed her life for anyone else but a brother (39). It can be deduced from her arguments that there are two compelling reasons which propel her decision- firstly her conviction that without completion of a ritualistic burial Polynices would not be able to descend to the nether world and meet other family member; Secondly her adherence and commitment to unwritten familial bond that transcends all other considerations in the world. In modern version, Antigone embarks on the risky endeavour on account of her own self – perhaps for saving herself from guilt-ridden conscience later or executing the task, her refractory self deems fit. In both instances, the indomitable spirit of individualism, a hallmark of modern times resonates through Antigone’s speeches, actions and beliefs. She foregrounds the personal will and individual conscience which take precedence over anything else. She is emphatic when she proclaims, without any shred of compunction, that she is doing it ‘for herself’. This paradigmatic shift in the motive and a new perspective towards life render the modern adaptation much closer to contemporary sensibilities and literary taste of the time.

It is noteworthy that Anouilh’s drama raises many socio-political questions, each capable of engendering a separate discourse. These concerns range from political posturing of the time to personal dilemma of existential nature. There is “co-existence of plurality of voices” populating Anouilh’s dramatic landscape. Dignity of life, including right to burial, poses serious questions to the contemporary ruling powers. Antigone’s espousal of perilous mission and assertion of her free will, is not taken kindly in a place where women have no agency. The play also affords an insight into the right way of living. Readers find themselves in a



---

conundrum whether to subscribe to Creon's life philosophy or to rebel against life and shape it as per our convictions and aspirations like Antigone does. Antigone's shocking revelation that "Creon was right. It's terrible to die. And I don't even know what I am dying for. I am afraid" (50) confuse the audience even further. The apathy of the soldiers towards Antigone's arrest or other happenings around them, reminds us of Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" where the world appears completely oblivious towards Icarus's fall. The only thing guards seem concerned about is their promotion, bribes or other narrow interests. The choral pronouncement that "only guards are left, and none of this matters to them" (52) demonstrates beginning of a new class in modern times which is not affected by the sufferings of elites. The tragedy ends without any clear resolution of the play in Brechtian style. The last choral performance startle the audience and alienate them from the stage. The chorus announces, "All those who were meant to die have died. All dead, stiff, useless, rotting. All those who have survived won't remember who was who and which was which" (52).

In Sophoclean tragedy, there is an unresolved tension between divine laws and law of the land each grappling for precedence. Though the Gods remain conspicuously absent from the stage, their shadowy presence keep the spectators on tenterhooks. It is for Hades, the God of the underworld and dignity of the human dead Antigone challenges Creon who stands as a symbol of unbridled and absolute state power. Despite being fully conscious of Polynices' irresponsible behaviour and also inanity of 'ritualistic burial', Anouilh's Antigone proceeds on pre-meditated path to soothe her inner self. It can also be viewed as a unique opportunity for Antigone to demonstrate her grit and determination in the face of repressive royal authority. Pipelzadeh observes, "She (Antigone) stands against the conventions and culture that make up the dominant ideas of a society, she stands against all the false conscious and subconscious, all the discriminations, inequalities, tyrannies shaped by the ideology" (47). Confronting the tyrannical power head on is what endows the play with contemporary appeal.



## References

- 🔗 Anouilh, Jean. *Antigone: A Tragedy*. Translated by Lewis Galantière. London, Methuen & Co., 1960.
- 🔗 Bakhtin, M. M. *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holoquist. University of Texas Press, 1981.
- 🔗 Bélanger, Jocelyn J, et al. “The Psychology of Martyrdom: Making the Ultimate Sacrifice in the Name of a Cause”. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2014, Vol. 107, No, 3, pp. 494-515.
- 🔗 Brook, Peter. *Elements of Drama*. Cambridge, 1963.
- 🔗 Frankl, V. E. *Man’s Search for Ultimate Meaning*. Basic Books, 2000.
- 🔗 Ghaemmaghami, Anahita Sadat. “Analysing the Reading of Antigone by Jean Anouilh”. *Shikshan Sansodhan: Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 4 Issue 1, Jan 2021, pp 84-89.
- 🔗 Goldhil, Simon. “Relations and Relationships”. *Reading Greek Tragedy*. Cambridge UP, 1986.
- 🔗 Kazmi, Sarah Syed. “Reworking of Antigone by Jean Anouilh”. *Journal of European Studies*, 31(2), July 2015 pp. 141-158.
- 🔗 Nagpal, Payal. “Jean Anouilh’s Antigone”. CEC-UGC Lecture Series, 30 Jan. 2023, <https://youtu.be/K7xHY4UuO0?si=IT4QgRF60cEqHNS>
- 🔗 Pipelzadeh, Faezeh. “An Analysis of Antigone in Jean Anouilh and Sophocles’ Antigone”. *The Indian Review of World Literature in English*, Vol. 17, No. II July- Dec 2021, pp. 44-51.
- 🔗 Sophocles. *Antigone*. Translated by Paul Woodruff. Hackett Publishers, 2001.
- 🔗 ---. *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus The King, Oedipus and Colonus*. Translated by Robert Fagles. Penguin Books, 1984.
- 🔗 ---. Willet, John. *The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht*. Methuen, 2020.