



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, political uncertainties marring 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 like to put it. The present article is an 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 tragedies invested the chorus with the narrative voice, Aeschylus another notable playwright of 5th century BC, added one more character on 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 tragedians of the Greek times made the play even more theatrical and complex by adding the third character which metamorphosed tragedies into the best expressive performative arts 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 quintessential elements of drama. His oeuvre of drama includes not only the modern comedies but ranged from Greek myths to ballet comedy. Notably, his adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone* shot him instantly into limelight 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 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 people on the stage per se. It also acted as a bridge between the masked characters on the stage and audience; It gave the spectators a sense of being included or represented on the stage. The audience could connect



with the chorus as it represented the common ethos and the religious sensibility of the people. But the chorus of the Anouilh is the modern version of the older chorus. Keeping the audience in view only felt that so for chorus represented only the archaic social structure which became virtually redundant and relatable to the modern audience like his audience as well addresses become more direct and succinct. There is less verbosity or element of circumlocution.

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 also does not condemn or control the actions of Antigone in the play unlike the classical chorus did. Readers observe a paradigmatic shift in the chorus response to divinity or the religious questions in the play. 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 blaming 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 conscious keeper of the city, a loyal advisor and 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 Antigone better. Besides it also renders the adaptation more humane and realistic.

Chorus like society more intrusive not allow freedom or free play to two citizens model society individualism another major shift be encounter is the characterization which is more convincing subtle and humane. Anouilh 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 classical one is more lifelike striking chords at once with the readers and audience. He is imbued with fatherly emotions- a concerned guardian, conscientious and dutiful statesman and a thorough gentleman. He beseeches Antigone to give up on her 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 seems 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 qualities. Anouilh's Creon is a well rounded, humane, rational and a balanced character with endearing qualities. Sometimes it gives an impression as if Anouilh is favoring Nazi occupation as Creon symbolically stands for German power. As per Aristotle's definition, he is indubitably a tragic hero. His struggles



are not only within but also without. He not only contrives to keep Thebes safe 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". Etiocles was no less rotten than Polynices. Creon laments, "Two gangsters were more a luxury than I could afford" (40). Proclaiming Etiocles as a war hero was Creon hopeless attempt to at least redeem his family's declining reputation as much as possible. In the entire play, out of all the characters, he seems most keen on avoiding the catastrophic end. 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 is doomed to push the boulder up the hill and still feel happy about it. 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.

On the other hand, 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 her dangerous mission she looks at 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 considerations. 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 and timid sister Ismene. Ismene seems to have internalized the fear and was terrified of the power structure in the beginning, sheds her ambivalence and resolves to stands 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 symbolising state's might power and how the 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 which sets protagonists of both the tragedies apart. Sophocles' Antigone preserves through a treacherous path to fulfill her sisterly and filial duties. 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 King Oedipus himself.

Some readers find Anouilh's Antigone extravagantly self-sacrificing throwing all cautions to air. The logic extended by her also appears flawed and absurd. Scholars wonder what 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 also opines , “Commitment to a higher cause infuse meaning in people’s life” (27).

Stage of 20th 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 has 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 20th century. He rather appropriates the historical anxiety and existential aporia into creating a tragedy resonant more with turbulent times of World War II and only connected loosely yet distantly 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 begins by her birth, when she is born as result of the incestuous adultery of Oedipus and his mother” (11).

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 as there is apparently no one left to mourn her death, is both heart-rending and depressing. Towards the end Antigone addresses dead Polynices through her soliloquy and affirms her unflinching love towards her brother. She unequivocally proclaims that she would not have sacrificed her life for anybody else in the world 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 and second is her adherence to unwritten familial bond which 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 on 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 takes 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 renders the modern adaptation much closer to contemporary sensibilities and literary taste of the time.

When the tragedy *Antigone* was enacted on the stage whether for the Athenian audience or for the French, the tragic myth of Oedipal cycle is already part of their collective memories. It presents the play writers with a formidable task as to how to defamiliarise what has been a part of popular Greek myth for generations. Hence the playwrights need to demonstrate their inventiveness and ingenuity while preserving the basic structure and essential ingredients of the myth. Ancient dramatists achieved this feat by investing their plots with unique and radical innovations which often left their audience much shocked. They encountered the dramatist’s cunning when they expected it the least. It also endowed their works 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). Pericles' underscores 'larger good' of the community and places it on same pedestal with individual welfare. He expects 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 identified itself with *Antigone* articulating her resentment vociferously and her rebellion against repressive power was found to be analogous to the French resistance against Nazis. The tragedy was allowed by German forces as they found some of Creon's speeches favouring their occupation.

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 dignity.

In old classic she 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* also doesn't object to Creon's calling Polynices "a vicious, soulless little carnivore" (39) as she herself had seen him inebriated and returning after partying in the wee hours.

Unlike its Greek predecessor 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 pose 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 right way of living our lives. 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. *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 which side to choose. 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 new class in modern times which is not affected by the sufferings of elites. Play 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 in Greek play, 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 symbolising unbridled 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. Univ 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.