Portrayal of feminists protests against ferocious kings in *Silappathikaram, Antigone* and *Natir Puja*¹

Summary: A comparison of three heroines who opposed the will of their kings.

Literature in Greece has about the same time–depth as have different ethnic literatures in India, comparable, with regard to linguistic kinship, to Sanskrit and Hindi, and with regard to literary values, also to those of South Indian tradition.

Greek literature, if the fragmentary Mycenaean Bronze Age evidence is ignored, begins with two ripe, perfect products: the Iliad and the Odyssey, two epics attributed traditionally to one poet, Homer, who lived in the 8th century B.C. "Traditionally", because "Homer", i.e. "Homēros", may have been a generic name, a designation in lingo meaning the 'compiler' or 'composer'. The name is thought to have to do with the adverb "homou" ('together'), and the verb "arariskō" ('to fit together').² A "homēros", then, is a gifted person able to fit several separate poetic texts, songs together and to perform them as a long, single poem. Similarly, the word "harmonia" which gives the English word 'harmony', has the same root, put simplified: –ar-. A "harmonia" ('harmony') means, in this way, originally, things whatever, put together properly.

A French proverb says "Cherchez la femme", 'try to find the woman', meaning that in every important event, in politics or elsewhere, there is a woman either as a motive or, at least, as a propelling force in the background. Looking for a proper topic for this communication I thought exactly of this: the narrative of the Iliad, the older Homeric epic. It is about a great war in the outgoing second millennium B.C. between the united Greek kings and Troy as the capital and leader of several equally united forces in Asia Minor, actual Turkey.

There may have been various historical reasons for this clash which was in reality a series of clashes but the epic finds only one: the

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abduction of Helen, the beautiful wife of Menelaos, king of Sparta, by Paris, son of the Trojan king Priamos. Troy's fate was to be captured. Menelaos sought help from his brother Agamemnon, the chief king, and the united forces of all the Greek kingdoms invaded and destroyed Troy. A reconciliation between Helen and Menelaos followed and they returned to Sparta. We find a parallel to this in the Ramayana, similarly a great epic. There is an abduction, that of Sita, with heavy consequences. There is no place to analyze the episode but I think, in the case of an abduction the lack or the presence of the willingness of a woman is a secondary detail; a structural approach in mythology and literature certainly would yield deeper similarities. The return of Sita, by the way, is observed in India until this day.

For world literature, an even more important instance is the case of Antigone, the heroine of Sophocles, the second in the row of the greatest Greek dramatists. To her, we find a parallel in the Tamil Silappathikaram ('The Ankle Bracelet'), an epic attributed to the 3rd century A.D. Prince Ilangō Adigal. The epic revolves around Kannaki, a simple woman, whose husband was killed by the king. Having lost her husband owing to a miscarriage of justice she was bold enough to oppose the king's order and wreaks her vengeance upon his kingdom. It is interesting to observe that Kovalan, Kannaki's fiancé was impressed by Yavana ships and their merchandise. The Yavanas were traders who came to South India from Egypt and Greece. Sophoclean Antigone was similarly bold but her fate was very tragic. She opposed the king's will when she buried her brother Polyneikes. In Sophocles' play, Kreon, a tyrant type of king, prohibited the burial because he considered Polyneikes a traitor.

Antigone was an exponent of divine law (eventually deified in Greek mythology) and she was ready to die for her deed. In a larger sense, it pays to remember that this problem was part of a more general philosophical question consisting in the physis–nomos complex which was present not only in politics and in philosophical thinking but even in what could be called the ancient linguistics (think of Plato's dialogue Kratylos).³

In the Sophoclean interpretation, Antigone's motives were those of Nature (Physis), and the king's motives were those of Law (Nomos), i.e. the legislation of a tyrant who gave "law" against nature. In the Athenian democracy of that time this was understood with a special sensibility because the Periclean democracy maintained that written and unwritten law were the same thing, and consequently no contradicting individual and institutional law existed.

Antigone's tragedy, who preferred to kill herself, was not the only disaster. Haemon, Kreon's son, who loved Antigone, wanted first to kill

³ Antigone, compared with the Indic perception of destiny is dealt with by Bharat Gupt (Dramatic Concepts. Greek and Indian, Delhi 2006, ©1993), pp. 227–228.
his father as a revenge. Kreon, rather cowardly, escaped, and then the son killed himself. Following this death, Eurydike, Kreon's wife, committed suicide. The tyrant's tragedy was complete: he remained alone. He cursed himself as if he lost his sight. This was also symbolic: the king did not see what he should have; think of Sophocles' other play, *Oedipus the King*.

Long before Shakespeare, this was a Shakespearian drama. Written in 442 B.C., it was considered the best, and remains one of the greatest achievements in literature until this day. "Cherchez la femme" – looking for the woman, the female figures, you arrive at the frontiers of divine and human law, an ever existing dilemma in Greek literature and thinking.

Rabindranath Tagore’s creative genius has not yielded the impressive *Natir Puja* (in free rendering: 'The Palace–dancer's Faithfulness') only, a play structurally comparable with *Antigone* and *Silappathikaram* but comparable also with regard to time: the characters in question are real, they lived in the same epoch with Sophocles. 4 In *Natir Puja*, Tagore describes the protest of Srimati, the palace–dancer, against King Ajatasatru’s order that females should not sweep the stupa on pain of death. Being a female slave, not caring for her life, she washed the stupa neatly and lighted it with a row of lamps. She was asked to dance and not to offer worship before the stupa. While dancing, she discarded all her garments and ornaments, and was left with only the ochre wrap of a Buddhist Bhikshuni. She knelt down and recited verses of formal worship ... Her head was struck off by order of the king, with heavy consequences for the queen mother, but, like in the case of Kreon, also for King Ajatasatru, originally a heavy opponent of Buddhism, himself.

The solution Tagore gives, if one is allowed to express himself in this way, is the retreat of Ajatasatru and a reconciliation between antagonistic Hinduism and Buddhism, at the sacrifice of a human life and of multiple tragedies. The protests of the protagonists of the three great works, *Silappatikaram*, *Antigone* and *Natir Puja* have to be admired and appreciated.

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