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# Opposing Hegemony: Sophocles' Antigone and Tagore's Srimati*

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## Abstract

Greek and Indian tradition share several common features. Many of them come from an ancestral relationship, others are historically or structurally motivated. This paper analyzes two female heroines in two dramas who oppose a higher will, Antigone in Sophocles' eponymous play and Srimati in Rabindranath Tagore's Natir Puja. Although Sophocles is an ancient Greek playwright whereas Tagore is a writer who lived in the last century, the comparison has been possible for two reasons: structural similarity, and the fact that the core legend underlying Tagore's play is contemporary to Sophocles: it dates back to the fifth century B.C. Both heroines act on their own opposing a tyrannical conduct and both of them readily face their tragic fate. The social aspects are evident and, accordingly, the conflicting ideologies are highlighted.

* A first draft of this paper was read at the Tagore Conference organized by Sri Venkateshwara College of Education on 2 March, 2012 in Karaikudi, South India. First drafts have also been published in Subbiah - Mallick - Solayan (2011: 21-23) and in Subbiah - Solayan (2012: 16-18). The paper published in 2011 focuses on the female figures Kannagi, Antigone and Srimati. The one published in 2012 focuses mainly on Antigone. The present paper tries to analyze Sophocles' *Antigone* and Tagore's *Natir Puja,* comparing the two heroines in a more extended way, with some linguistic observations added.

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A further comparable feature is that the exponents of tyrannical will relent and are punished. The reader's sympathy is in both cases with the two innocent female victims. To the analysis a few linguistic remarks are added.

Keywords: Tyrannical, Gods, Divine, Human(s), Significant Names, Nature, Law, Worship, Conflicting Ideologies, Tradition, Necessity

The relation of rulers and female subjects is the subject of the two plays I set out to compare. In Greek literature, an important instance is the case of Antigone, the heroine of a play by Sophocles, the second greatest playwright in the ranks of the Greek dramatists. We find parallels to Antigone in the traditions of other nations, and so also in India, e.g. in Tamil literature, namely in the epic Silappathikaram. This is about Kannaki, a simple woman, whose husband was killed by the king. She was bold enough to oppose the king's order, and sought justice.[1] Antigone was similarly bold and her fate was similarly tragic. She opposed the king's will when she buried her brother Polyneikes. Kreon, a tyrannical type of king, a "hard-boiled autocrat", to use Aarthi's words (2011: 117.118), in the same way as Ajatasatru in Tagore's *Natir Puja,* which is to be discussed here, prohibited the burial because he considered Polyneikes a traitor. Antigone, like Kannaki, was deified. Greek mythology puts her among the goddesses, and it is a question of the poet's or the writer's intention whether she is shown as more or less divine or human. And certainly in India there is an important work where we may find a parallel to the Greek drama: this is *Natir Puja* (*The Dancing Girl's Worship*), a play by Rabindranath Tagore, written in 1926.[2] First, I will analyze *Antigone*, and then compare it with the heroine Srimati as appearing in Tagore's play.[3]

[1] The Silappathikaram is not the focus of this paper. The best English translation of this work is provided by R. Parthasarathy 1993. It was also published by Penguin Books India in 2004. For a general orientation Zvelebil 1975 is useful.

[2] I use the text, and the orthography of the names, based on Tagore 2000. Strictly speaking, the title of this paper could be formulated as "Sophocles' Antigone and Tagore's Nati". Indeed, this was my intention but I changed it so that the title does not seem inconsistent. In reality, the

Antigone's fatal story is that she was a daughter of the accidentally incestuous marriage between King Oedipus of Thebes and his mother Iokaste. She is the subject of a story in which she attempts to secure a respectable burial for her brother even though he was a traitor to Thebes and the law forbids, at the same time, mourning for him, on pain of death.

The Sophoclean Antigone acts on her own and, accordingly, she is ready to die for her deed. Considering her name as meaningful makes sense.[4]

present solution is more inconsistent: although "Antigone" is interpreted and remains to this day a proper name, it was *not*, as *nati* is *not*. *Antigone*, as a common noun, is a telling name to which I will return below.

[3] Naturally, the literature on either Sophocles or on Antigone is too large to cite here. Our aim cannot be an analysis that would meet the requirements of a research paper within traditional classical philology or within a mythological analysis. I may refer, with regard to India, to Bh. Gupt (2006) who published a comparative study on Greek and Indian theatre involving even the common Indo-European level for which he assumes the existence of a "theatre", or of a *hieropraxic theatre* or a *hieropraxic division of space* as he expresses himself (see e.g. Gupt 2006: 126). Antigone for him, appears in the *miasma-katharsis* complex (cf. Indian *śauca-aśauca*) as a victim from the first whereas her misfortune was her "portion", i.e. her *moira* (ibid. 45-46; see also ibid. 227-228). Certainly, the *miasma* is an important dimension not only in Indo-European antiquity but also in classical antiquity. *Moira* and *Ananke* are synonymous, both present in classical Greek tradition, but the first one can be regarded as more ancient (to be found in Homer, for example), and consequently as more applicable to prehistoric levels. With regard to mythology, I may mention the name of Karl Kerényi (a colleague of the Swiss C.G. Jung) who published important contributions to Greek mythology, Antigone's figure included. The merit of the Jung - Kerényi approach is the elaborating of the "archetypal dimension" for mythology. On the archetypes, basic reading is *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* by C.G. Jung (2005). A joint publication by the two authors is *Essays on the Science of Mythology* (Jung/ Kerényi 1969), whereas on Antigone see Kerényi's *Dionysos und das Tragische in der Antigone* (Kerényi 1935) and *The Heroes of the Greeks* (Kerényi 1958). Kerényi has been called "the most psychological of mythologists", and Jung "the most mythological of psychologists". (The concept of the "archetype" or "archetypal image", German 'Archetypus' or 'Urbild', goes back to Jung, and has been abundantly applied by Kerényi to Greek mythological figures).

[4] This is a word, which is the female counterpart of the familiar name Antigonos (the name of Macedonian generals) but the meaning of "anti" ('against'), in this case, must have been strongly felt. The prefix in Greek is quite productive. The verb, to which the name can be connected, "antigennao", has the two meanings "anti" allows: 'to generate in rivalry', or 'to generate in return'. In a tragedy a *double entendre* cannot be excluded, i.e. you associate

Antigone, the daughter of Oedipus, king of Thebes, and Iokaste, who was also the mother of Oedipus, coming certainly from an anti-marriage, even if neither Oedipus nor Iokaste were guilty by intention, went against the king. In similar cases, one can think of fate (*Ananke* or Necessity) as of a driving force as understood by antique thinking. To be sure, the name of *Kreon*, Antigone's opponent, is also typical. It means 'ruler'; and *Polyneikes*, who received the last funeral honours by his sister, is 'manifold strife'. Names are not given and used incidentally: *Srimati*, too, is a telling designation. She is the "one who is rich and good in sense" (Rama Rao 1985: 2).[5]

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 famous Periclean democracy maintained that written and unwritten law were the same thing, and consequently no contradicting individual and institutional law existed.[6] Antigone's death, it pays to remember, in a larger sense, is a problem

something that has not been stated explicitly but is thought to be important. Indeed, in poetry, at least in Greek and Latin literature, this was even a valuable tool of composition. (For the verb *antigennaō* and the related names, it is sufficient to refer to the Liddle-Scott-Jones Lexicon (LSJ 1977: 154).

[5] For Kreōn (Kreiōn in Homer) and Polyneikēs ('much wrangling', based on *neikos* 'quarrel, strife, feud' see the same lexicon (LSJ 1977: 993.994 and 1440 respectively). Iokastē's name (with a parallel *Epikastē*) has not been interpreted. An old explanation suggests "Shining" but this may be without scientific importance. Has the name to do somehow with *Kadmos*, the founding hero of Thebes?

[6] The legal system of the Athenian Democracy is too large an issue to be dealt with in this paper. It can satisfactorily be studied in any scholarly library. A short but good survey is given, e.g., by G. Poethke in Irmscher - Johne 1979: 128 (s.v. Demokratie). A further powerful component in the Sophoclean drama deserving an analysis elsewhere in my opinion is this: how can one, who comes from an unnatural birth, act in the name of Nature and the Divine? For an answer to this question the paradox of Necessity (*Ananke*) should be considered: to reach a balance of nature at any cost, by social marginalization, unnatural birth or whatever else. The issue points beyond the present investigation and involves mythology, even philosophy, e.g. Plato, who came after Sophocles. One thinks of the properties of the universe, as in Timaeus e.g., describing the

that 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 ancient linguistics (think of Plato's dialogue *Kratylos*, which investigates the *correctness* of names).[7]

Sophocles' play deals with three main questions: whether Polyneikes ought to be given burial rituals, whether someone who buried him in defiance of the state ought to be punished, and whether Kreon, who was the brother of Iokaste, is entitled to the throne or not. Polyneikes is buried at the very beginning, and so the play is occupied mainly with the second and third questions. Once Kreon has discovered that Antigone buried her brother against his orders, the ensuing discussion of her fate is devoid of arguments for mercy.

An important issue regarding Sophocles' *Antigone* is the problem of the so-called second burial. When she poured dust over her brother's body, Antigone completed the burial ritual and thus fulfilled her duty to him. Having been properly laid to rest, Polyneikes' soul could proceed to the underworld whether or not the dust was removed from his body. However, Antigone went back after his body was uncovered and performed the ritual again, an act that seems to be unmotivated by anything other than a plot necessity so that she could be caught in the act of disobedience, leaving no doubt of her guilt.

One possible explanation for this dramatic device is that the first burial was performed by the gods, not Antigone. When the guards examine the first burial, they see no tracks leading up to the body and no evidence of digging. After hearing the guard's story, the chorus comments, "I had misgivings from the first, my liege, | Of something more than natural at work" (l. 278-279).[8] Therefore when Antigone goes to give the last tribute of respect to her brother

substance as a lack of homogeneity or balance of the elements. It was Plato's task to give a systematic shape to questions raised by the Greek tragedies of destiny.

[7] There is one more similar feature in the two stories here dealt with, suitable for future comparison: just as Antigone was an "anti-daughter" coming from an "anti-marriage", and her father, Oedipus, was, though through Fate, a parricide, so the royal son, Ashokchandra, was, as an aftermath of a curse, renamed "Ajatasatru", i.e. - according to one interpretation – 'one who is an enemy of his own clan from even before his birth'. For the name, however, see also Monier-Williams 2005: 10. He, too, at least in one tradition, killed his father to seize the throne.

[8] Quoted from Storr 1968: 335.

the "second" time, she is really going for the first time, and is not aware that the gods have buried her brother already. Is this an anticipation of the interacting rules: those of human and those of divine origin that we become aware of when reading the story? We see a similar interdependence between the human and the divine in the Tagore play.

Antigone's determination to bury Polyneikes, despite the fact that he invaded Thebes,[9] her town, arises from a desire to bring honour to her family, and to honor the higher law of the gods. She repeatedly declares that she must act to please "those that are dead" (l. 75),[10] because they hold more weight than any ruler, that is the weight of divine law. In the opening scene, she makes an emotional appeal to her sister Ismene[11] saying that they must protect their brother out of sisterly love, even if he did betray their state. Antigone believes that there are rights that are inalienable because they come from the highest authority, or Authority itself, that is the divine sphere.

Fidelity is another important issue. While he rejects Antigone's actions based on family honour, Kreon appears to value family strongly himself as well. This is one of the few areas where Kreon's and Antigone's standards seem to align. When talking to Haemon, Kreon demands of him not only obedience as a citizen, but also as a son. Kreon even goes so far as to say "Well

[9] To this, compare the Aeschylean play *Hepta epi Thebas* ("The Seven against Thebes", written probably in 467 B.C.): the story immediately precedes the Sophoclean one. Polyneikes' attack on his native city fulfills a paternal curse, but the action that precipitated it was his brother Eteocles' unexpected refusal to surrender the throne at the end of his year. This also illustrates the fact that *Antigone* worked up just one event in a complex series of mythological and historical events exploited by the Greek tragedies of destiny. The city of Thebes relates to Mycenaean times. The historical settlement gave rise to various cycles of legends, one of which is the subject of Sophocles' play. With regard to chronology, the Cadmea, the central fortress of ancient Thebes, was built around 1400 B.C.

[10] Quoted from Storr 1968: 320.

[11] The etymology of this name (Ismēnē) is unknown. It has been suggested that it may have to do with the verb *oida* ('I know'), the 1st person plural of which is *ismen*. Even if this is a wrong explanation, for a literary work, I would not exclude a *double entendre*. All the more so because etymologically, the verb *oida* shares a common semantic field with 'to see'. Cf. for example the case of Latin *videō* ('I see').

spoken: so right-minded sons should feel. In all deferring to a father's will (l. 640-641)".[12] This stance seems extreme, especially in light of the fact that Kreon elsewhere advocates obedience to the state above all else. While it is not explicit how he would handle these two values in conflict, it is clear that even for Kreon, family occupies a place as high as, if not higher, than the state.

The tragedy of Antigone, who preferred to kill herself, was not the only disaster. Haemon, Kreon's son, who loved Antigone, wanted first to kill his father as revenge. Kreon, in a rather cowardly manner, escaped, and then the son killed himself. Following this death, Eurydike, Kreon's wife, committed suicide. The tyrant's ill fate was complete: he remained alone, and he cursed himself as if he had lost his sight: he did not see what he should have - think of Sophocles' other play, *Oedipus*.

It is perhaps not an exaggeration to maintain that this is a "Shakespearean" drama produced long before Shakespeare. Written in 442 B.C., it was considered the best, and remains one of the greatest achievements in literature until this day.

With regard to Tagore's *Natir Puja*, the story of a worshipping palace-dancer, the parallel is most clear in the Buddhist core legend[13] that the Indian playwright reshaped in literary form. It is important to know that the three dramas published together (see Tagore 2000) form a unity: all of them are based on Buddhist stories (Bimal Barua 2011: 8). *Natir Puja* is the second one in the series. The Buddhist inclination is felt in the hymn sung by the Bhiksus, beginning with "All the creatures are crying for a new birth of thine" (Tagore 2000: 124, see below); cf. Bimal Barua (2011: 4.9). Beside the fact that a Buddhist core underlies the three plays, the author's political convictions

[12] Quoted from Storr 1968: 365.

[13] Cf. K.R. Kripalani in Tagore 2000: 81 ff. Chronologically, the legend, attached to king Bimbisara (c. 546-494 B.C.), founder of the ancient empire of Magadha, can be dated to the sixth to fifth century B.C. This fact justifies a comparison between the *Antigone* by Sophocles, a fifth century B.C. playwright, and Tagore's play written in the first half of the twentieth century. According to the generally accepted historical version, Bimbisara was killed by his son Ajatasatru (c. 491-461 B.C.). See a short discussion of this prose drama by Das (2011: 63-65).

are clearly felt, perhaps with the most persuasive force in *Muktha-Dara* (see K.R. Kripalani in Tagore 2000: 5). The social sensitiveness in *Natir Puja*, I think, is salient, whereas in *Chandalika* the tragedy of self-consciousness overreaching its limit is a problem which connects the play with the two preceding ones (see Kripalani *ibid*.: 145).

Ajatasatru, who followed king Bimbisara, a contemporary of Buddha, on the throne of the Magadha empire, forbids the practice of Buddhism, so also cleansing the stupa built by Bimbisara, and persecutes its followers. In the meantime, on the *Vasanta Purnima* day (the birthday of the Buddha), the Order has chosen Srimati, the nati (a palace-dancer), to offer worship at the shrine. Since such dances, traditionally, were reserved for the princesses, one of them, Ratnavali, incensed at the idea that a low creature would be honoured with this right, gets an order from the king that the nati should dance instead before the stupa (intending to desecrate the altar). At the same time, any worship before the shrine was forbidden, and also dancing on such a day was not appropriate (cf. Tagore 2000: 123).

Tagore pictures the improperness of the order by the Buddhist monks who enter in a procession singing:

> "The world today is wild with the delirium of hatred,
> the conflicts are cruel and unceasing is anguish,
> crooked are its paths, tangled its bonds of greed.
> All creatures are crying for a new birth of thine.
> O Thou of boundless life,
> save them, raise thine eternal voice of hope,
> let Love's lotus with its inexhaustible treasure of honey
> open its petals in thy light (Tagore 2000: 123-124).

Srimati begins her performance but in the end, her dance proves to be a Buddhist act of worship: she takes off her garment and is only left with the ochre wrap of a *Bhikshuni*, a Buddhist female monastic. She was immediately executed by the order of the king. Her heroic devotion caused Ratnavali to relent. Concurrently, Bimbisara, the deposed king, was murdered by the order of Ajasatru. The two deaths, however, also caused Ajatasatru to relent, and he

revoked the policy of persecution. Too late for Srimati. These points in Tagore's *Natir Puja*, i.e. opposing the king's will, the sudden deaths, the belated repentances, are the evident ones that can immediately be compared with corresponding actions in Sophocles' play, *Antigone.* Opposing the king's will equals, in both cases, also opposing earthly law and obeying another one, thought to be divine. At this point, a difference between the two gender roles may be indicated. In both cases a woman opposes a higher power but it is only in Tagore's contribution that such a fact takes on a political colour. The Indian playwright was very sensitive to social issues and he understood that the women of his country should be liberated from their "colonization": their unbearable dependence on the male members of the society. "Women's empowerment" (as Aruna Devi discusses it in 2012: 385 ff.) - a twentieth century label and approach - can well explain the playwright's theorizing and the choice of the Buddhist legend for his subject but Srimati's action, as well as Antigone's, stand in the frame of ethics, law, and religion, without involving a struggle for emancipation. Such an up-to-date sounding issue did not exist in antiquity.[14] This is important to emphasize, however much we may think today either in a politically democratic, or in an egalitarian Buddhistic way. The epoch-making Athenian democracy under Pericles in the fifth century B.C., which also became a world-wide ideal, was, in reality, a system of social justice for the free male citizens only; women and slaves did not have the same rights. In this way, when Antigone alludes to equality in her altercation with Kreon this applies to the hereafter: "Nathless the realms below these rites require" (l. 519).[15] Similarly, however much Buddhism is egalitarian, and however much Tagore tried to make it into an ideology of modern emancipation (cf. Bijlert 2012: 23), it was not the only doctrine in India, and it was even

[14] To be sure, until the twentieth century, women did not have the right to vote anywhere. The evaluation of this fact is not the task of this paper. With all their subordination, the picture women offer in antiquity is not homogeneous. It is natural that the great time-depth, for Greece at least, the numerous polis-states, and the differences between the Greek and the Roman World, brought differences with them. A short insightful survey on women's position is given by Ilse Rochow in Irmscher - Johne 1977: 177-178, *s.v.* Frau.

[15] Quoted from Storr 1968, 355.

driven into the background under Muslim pressure on the one hand, and the ascendency of Hindu religious leaders like Adi Sankara (788-820 A.D.) and Kumarila Bhatta (700 A.D.) on the other (cf. Bimal Barua 2011: 2).[16]

So that the present analysis is objective, one must admit that Srimati's confession - the reason for this comparison - is not the only important plotline in the play. The basic problem is the tension created between the old Vedic ideology and the new Buddhist spirit. Srimati's position and sacrifice belong to the relatively simple developments. Lokesvari, the queen mother, goes further. She was once a devotee, and now she is widowed; both her husband, the king, and his son became followers of Buddha and abandoned her[17]. In her character the social drama of two conflicting ideologies is symbolized. One might find a parallel to the fidelity issue above, in Sophocles: the ambiguities of a queen mother here, a king's (Kreon's) hesitation there. Kreon rejects Antigone's actions yet he strongly respects family values. Clearly, in both cases, humans act in an interdependent system of rules: those of human and those of divine origin. It is in this sense that the Sophoclean "second burial" issue has to be interpreted. This, however, important as it is in Sophocles, has no parallel in the Tagore play. Like Lokesvari, princess Ratnavali is rather against the new ideology. Yet, the repeated killings and the dancing-girl's sacrifice change them, and in the end, they honour both the dead girl and Buddha's teaching. In addition, the relentless king Ajatasatru, too, changes his mind and so the influence of Buddhism is restored: "My refuge is in the Buddha!" (pp. 139-140, *ibid.*). The relentless Kreon in Sophocles' play, similarly, regrets his deeds, whereas Antigone, unlike Lokesvari and Ratnavali, who

[16] With regard to Buddhist egalitarianism, a problem, as a social one, not to be tackled here, Faure 2003 is the best reading. Tsomo in her Introduction to *Buddhist Feminist Revolution* (2014) remarks: "Unfortunately many Buddhists continue to believe their own propaganda - that Buddhist egalitarianism already extends to women even while evidence of women's subordination is before their very eyes" (*ibid.* 7). One can also consult Detrick 2010.

[17] Cf. her bitter words (e.g. in Tagore 2000: 91-92): "Kingdom! Empty words! Such a kingdom is a mockery for a Ksatriya king. Look at me, see what I am today - widowed, though my husband lives; barren, having born a son; homeless, in the midst of a palace!"

come to an agreement of feelings, remains alone: her sister, Ismene, does not contribute to her sacrifice. Tagore himself is conciliatory: he was deeply influenced both by the Upanishadic and Brahminical or Vedic ideology. Das (2011) dedicated a long paper to the "confluence of ideas" in Tagore's thinking: he "forged a synthesis of the theoretical aspect of the Upanishads and their practical application as he found in the life of Buddha, showing in his […] writings how such a synthesis may pave the way for a better way of life for mankind" (*ibid*. 57, see also 62.68). Similarly, and before that, Bimal Barua dedicated a survey to the same topic for Tagore's birth centenary in 1961, reprinted as Bimal Barua 2011. The finding of his paper is that Tagore was perhaps more under the influence of Buddhist thinking than under the traditional Vedic - Upanishadic one.

Sophocles and Tagore: two emblematic figures in the literary tradition of two great nations - they equally contributed not only to the genre of drama in their countries but also to expounding such important issues as religion, law, tradition, ethics, duty and society. Their plays equally reflect a victory over tyranny, meanness and selfishness. The universality of *Antigone* is obvious; Tagore, too, as Rama Rao (1985: 1) asserts, "leapt from the circumference to the centre and seized it in terms of universality". Quite like Sophocles' play and the problems it dealt with, *Natir Puja* is situated between the temporal power, the king and the spiritual power, the Buddha. Srimati is chosen as the instrument of the great Affirmation. Love conquers and the power of the spirit is irresistible (cf. Rama Rao 1985: 2). Antigone's humanistic message is much the same. The two heroines opposed the kings' orders, and - to cite J. Lacan after Valliammai (2012: 215.216) - acted as "self-willed victims".[18] They are, indeed, martyrs, as Raja Subhashini (2011: 191.195) underlines in her discussion.[19] Srimati "can defy the royal sceptre of King Ajatasatru and sacrifice her life for worship at the feet of Lord Buddha" (Bimal Barua 2011:

[18] The expression comes, however, as a rendering of the Greek original. Cf. "A self-willed rebel", sung by the chorus (l. 875, Storr 1968: 381). The Liddle-Scott-Jones Lexicon, too, gives the translation 'self-determined', 'self-willed' (p. 279, s.v. "autognotos").

[19] In the same way Bijlert 2012: 26.

6). Respectively, Antigone felt firmly helped by the gods in defying King Kreon's order. The two heroines, Antigone and Srimati, can be regarded as the representatives of the great Affirmation against regimes based on subordination of the individual to a state or to another individual.

What this writer can add as a common frame for the two analogous female reactions in the two plays compared is a reminder of the ancient concept of the force of the Greek *Ananke* or Necessity, also of central importance in Plato's philosophy and in Neoplatonism. As a paraphrase of a line written by the sixth-fifth century poet Simonides, this proverb is still quoted in Greece today: "Even the gods will be persuaded by Necessity". It is in this sense that both Antigone and Srimati turn out victorious.

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