

The Antediluvian Feminist Spirit as Found in Sophocles' Antigone and Ilango's Kannaki: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

The term Feminism is by and large used by people around the world. No one can exactly narrate the birth history of this very movement, though a lot more stories have turned up. But it is sure that it is not a theory of recent times. The understanding comes if one could try to examine the lives of the pre-historic women in relation to the term Feminism in the pre-historic period without focusing on one particular culture. Everyone knows about the misfortunes of women that they had in the past. The medieval literary works reflect the sufferings of women in the patriarchal society. The writers including women have intended to pass the bitter history of women to the entire world. They failed to highlight the courageous maneuvers of Antediluvian feminists in their works. The ancient Greek writer Sophocles has featured the fearless character of Antigone in his famous play *Antigone*. The virtues of Antigone is very well complemented with the ancient Sangam Tamil Literature woman Kannaki, portrayed by the great writer Ilango Adigal in his Work *Cilappathikaram*. By comparing the feminist qualities of Antigone and Kannaki, one could perceive the idea that they possessed the Feminist Sprit in the Antediluvian era itself.

Keywords: Feminism, Antigone, Kannaki, Voice Identity, Antediluvian Feminists, Sophocles and Ilango, Cilappathikaram.

While worldwide there is an ongoing debate over the genesis of the school of feminism, many people believe that it was just two centuries old. This false assumption of literary readers gives the impression that they have failed to speculate the antediluvian spirit of feminism which is found in the women characters of classical literature. It is an interesting fact that the classical women were the forerunners to the women whom we consider as the pioneers of feminism. The classical women too protested the male establishment like the modern feminist, though they were underdogs in the domain of patriarchal universe. They lived their life with lots of social and familial problem. But they never intimidated by any human being or human power but by divine laws. Though they were nurtured to be submissive to men and society and also their whole lives are reduced by earthly laws, they were so assertive to stand for justice with their liberated spirit and revealed their unyielding stamina even in the irrespective of the situations.

The modern women in fact inherited the feminist qualities from their super-models who represented their self-identity through voice in the classical times itself. One example of a classical feminist from Greek literature could be Antigone, a stubborn character created by Sophocles in the fifth century itself for his classic work *Antigone*. Despite many feminist characters of Western classical literature Antigone could be regarded as one of the finest examples of Radical Feminism. Another one in South-Indian Tamil Classical literature is Kannaki who has possessed the ultimate courage to fight against the injustice committed by the King. The valour of both Antigone and Kannaki can be compared and appreciated. The character Kannaki is beautifully warped by the famous Tamil Classical writer Ilango Adigal in his Epic *Cilappathikaram*.

In Sophocles' *Antigone*, the woman protagonist Antigone is introduced as one of the offsprings of the king Oedipus and queen Jocasta. Antigone is distressed by her uncle and the King of Thebes Creon's denial for the burial to the dead body of her own brother Polinices, who has been declared as the traitor of the country Thebes. Though she is not expected to act against the command of the King, Antigone makes-up her mind and get ready to perform the funeral rites by defying the royal proclamation of Creon, the cruel king of Thebes. Though Antigone is submissive and loyal, she demonstrates feminist logic especially when she chooses to challenge a powerful male establishment. She anticipates the helping hand from her sister Ismene, to complete the task of the proper burial of her brother's corpse. But Ismene is not willing to join Antigone for the outlawed act. Eventually Ismene accepts that she is not strong enough to rebel against the King. But Antigone is firm in her decision and she resolves, "I shall never desert him, never", and then she starts scolding Ismene, "Go your own way.... Live if you will, live and defy the holiest laws of heaven" (P. 55).

Antigone presupposes what will happen if she defies the law of authority. But she is willing to face any danger in future. She thinks that the act of burial to her brother's dead body alone can give her honour and peace. She assumes that it is her birthright to adore her brother even after his death. After the burial she says with all her satisfaction, "I have given my brother burial. What greater honour could I wish" (P. 81-82). Antigone takes effort to do the proper burial, as she loves Polinices very much as Eteocles, and she respects the law of heaven which demands proper burial for a dead body than the law of the earthly King. Hegel in hisexplains "The Loss of the brother is [...] irreparable to her sister and her duty towards him is the highest" "And the moment of the individual self, recognizing, and being recognized, can here assert its right, because its linked to the equilibrium of the blood and is a relation devoid of desire." (P. 274)

Antigone is absolutely fearless, though she receives the death penalty for her protest towards the royal command. When Ismene asks her to act secretly, she defiantly says, "Publish it to all the world..... there is no punishment that can rob me off my honourable death" (P. 23-24). Judith Butler rightly points out in her *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* as, "Antigone defended and championed as a principle of feminine defiance of statism and as an example of anti-authoritarianism" (P. 01). Antigone wins the readers' admiration by her devotion on her brother, her reverence for Gods and their laws, her religious faith in family ties, her

determination, fearlessness and boldness which lead her to act as an active figure rather than a static one. Introduction to the book *Femnisit Readings of Antigone*, the author Fanny Soderback writes “Antigone, a woman who defies King Creon’s edict without any fear, doubts, or regrets. This courageous woman, the fruit of incest, has fascinated philosophers in the nineteenth century, inspired playwrights in the twentieth century, and intrigued feminist thinkers and activists for decades” (P. 02)

Antigone’s argument in front of the King Creon shows her feminist spirit. When she is accused and brought in front of the King, she argues and justifies boldly what all she did were noble things. Antigone’s voice identity is described by Judith Butler in her *Antigone’s Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* as, “Antigone argues through a powerful set of physical and linguistic strength” (P. 02). When Creon asks her whether she has performed the burial of Polynices or not, without any hesitation she admits that she has done the act. Creon asks, “And yet you dared to contravene it?” (P. 356). She boldly replies

“That order did not come from God. Justice that dwells with the gods below, knows no such law. I did not think your edicts strong enough to overrule the unwritten unalterable laws of God and Heaven, you being only a man” (P. 357-359).

Antigone has not ever tried giving additional respect to Creon, because he is a man or he is an authoritative of patriarchal society. She has never tried to eulogize the King for his position and favours. She neither wants to be in a pitiable state as well. Instead she boldly argues for the equality between sexes. She firmly believes that all are equal in front of God the Almighty. And she declares that human beings and their laws are inferior to God. They can stand now but not in the future. But the immortal laws of Heaven are “not of yesterday, or to-day, but everlasting” (P. 361-363). Antigone further says,

I knew that I should have to die, of course,
 With or without your order. If it be soon,
 So much the better. Living in daily torment
 As I do, who would not be glad to die? (P. 364-365)

Though Antigone’s splendid speech marks the failure of Creon’s judgment, the last two lines are the witnesses of her agony under Creon’s regime.

The daring speech of Antigone is an evident of her unrestricted feminist vivacity. She speaks not because she is loyal towards her family, but because she is severely affected by her maternal uncle Creon’s condemnation. Antigone’s rigid disposition and feminist mentality may be the cause of Creon’s feeling. After the death of her father Oedipus, Creon becomes the new king of Thebes. As a King, he wants to receive respect from the people of Thebes. Purposely he starts abusing his power and forces on others in order to enslave people. It is witnessed in the dialogue that takes place between Antigone and the King.

Antigone:all these would say that what I did was
 honourable, But fear locks up their lips. To speak and act,
 Just as he likes is a King’s prerogative.

Creon : You're wrong, none of my subjects thinks as you do.

Antigone: Yes sir, they do; but dare not tell you so (P. 398-402).

Creon always shows himself as an envoy of Tyranny. He fails to perceive the unwritten laws of God. He is not easily compromised by anybody. He is piggish and he is impudent in front of others, especially before women. Always projects himself as a self-centered and anti-woman individual. He states, "We'll have no women's law here, while, I live" (P. 420) and he calls Ismene as a "Crawling Viper" (P. 425) and Antigone as "She-devil" (P. 425). Creon announces the death penalty to Antigone. Though Antigone weeps about her prevailing death as an ordinary woman at the initial stage, she does not feel sorry for her action and never thinks to seek apology from Creon. Instead she declares that injustice has done to her and her family. She comes out of the web of fear, pacifies and musters up her courage by herself as a brave woman.

As a feminist, she does not expect sympathy from others. Instead she just wants to seek the support of others. Luckily, Antigone wins the support of almost all the characters in the play except the brutal king Creon. Haemon, the lover of Antigone and son of Creon, also speaks in favour of Antigone. In order to change the cruelest attitude and the atrocious nature of his father, he accuses his father and his vicious verdict proclaimed against Antigone. The voice of the people of Thebes also is heard during the interaction between the father and the son. Haemon could not change the mind of his egoistic father. Creon declares that Antigone is dishonourable woman. But Haemon rejects by saying,

..... the people of Thebes think not.....
 On every side I hear voices, of pity
 For this poor girl, doomed to the cruelest death,
 And most unjust, that ever woman suffered
 For an honourable action-burying a brother (P. 552-556)

Creon is infuriated by the words of his son and he blames him as "villain" (P. 601) and also calls him as "despicable coward" (P. 595). Creon takes it as a chance to hurt the feelings of Antigone through his own sarcastically, merciless speech: I'll have her taken to a desert place, there she may pray to death, the god she loves and ask release from death.... (P. 632- 636). This very speech reminds the readers of the crucifixion of Christ from the Gospel according to St. Matthew in *New Testament* where Jesus Christ is mortified by the people before his death. They utter almost the same uttered to Antigone by the Creon. The people say to Jesus "Save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the son of God!" (27: 40-41). Even the Chorus too gives their support to Antigone (after the bidding speech) by calling her, "goddess of immortal birth" (P. 677), "god-born maiden" (P. 892).

The most affected figure like Antigone in the Tamil classical Epic *Cilappathikaram* is Kannaki. The culture, tradition, the setting of the story and the life style of the characters of Ilango's *Cilappathikaram* is not as similar to story of Antigone. The comparison is made only on the two women characters Kannaki and Antigone. Their sufferings under the male establishment and their stubborn antediluvian feministic spirit are notably comparable. Antigone's verbal

combat against the King's judgment can be correlated with the prodigious persecution of Kannaki against Pandiya, the King.

Kannaki is the wife of Kovalan, who is the son of a great trader Masathuvan. Basically, Kannaki is a submissive lady, loyal to her husband and family as Antigone. Kovalan and Kannaki lead their life peacefully. The plight starts after their arrival to Madurai city. They approach Madurai city, in order to earn money and live happily without any interruption. When Kovalan goes to a goldsmith for selling his wife's Cilambu (anklet), he is caught and accused of stealing queen's Cilambu. But what he possesses is not the property of the queen. He is immediately brought before Pandiya, the King. Without further investigation, the King announces the death penalty to Kovalan. This unfortunate news reaches Kannaki. On hearing this unjust pronouncement, Kannaki becomes furious and steps towards the palace and acts like a fearless woman. Her angry words to the gate keeper indicates Pandian's mistake of announcing wrong judgment. And she blames that the King is 'a fool and a merciless creature' (P. 176). Ilango's description of Kannaki's terrible physical appearance captivates the attention of all readers. The gate keeper says,

Someone waits at the gate. She is not the deity Korkai.....
 nor is he Anaku (Bhadrakali)..... nor even she is the Kali of
 the forest..... Nor again is she the goddess that tore up the
 mighty chest of Daruka..... (P. 182)

From this utterance, one could understand the transformation happens due to her anguish that she undergoes on death of her husband Kovalan.

Though Kannaki has lived as a common citizen of the Kingdom, she has never ever failed to protest King's cruel judgement. When Kannaki stands before the King and Ministers, Pandiyan enquires Kannaki. On the other hand, she calls the king courageously, "an inconsiderate king" (P. 195). Pandiyan argues that he is right in his judgement. But Kannaki pretexts that the king has done injustice to her husband. She also indicates that the king has fallen from his righteous course. She accuses that the king has misused his power by proclaiming wrong judgement that has resulted Kovalan's death. Critics say that destiny has played fowl in Kovalan's life. But when Kannaki talks about the unrighteous scepter of the king, she refuses to approve that fate is the reason for her husband's death. She strongly says that it is the King who is fully responsible for her husband's cruel death sentence. Finally by breaking the anklet she proves what Kovalan has possessed is not queen's and so he is blameless. The King Pandiya gets embarrassed on witnessing this event. At last the King starts realizing his folly and he repents for the wrong judgement to an innocent common man. Pandiya feels that he has no right to live in this world as he has uttered an incorrect verdict. He falls down from his throne towards his wife Kopperundevi as he feels guilty and dies there itself.

Seeking for rights as equal to men and making women, 'come out of the kitchen' can be described by people as feminists' attitude but it is more appropriate to witness women rise as tornado whenever injustice is provoked. Though Antigone and Kannaki have lived under the atrocious male dominating power, they have fought for justice without the fear of death. They have sacrificed their precious lives for sake of truth and justice and they two have become

responsible for the later consequences in the history. They are not only feminists but also the incarnations of justice. Though Antigone and Kannaki protest the monarchy, Antigone has belonged to royal family and has protested the King who is her kin whereas Kannaki has protested the king as an ordinary citizen. Judith Butler manifests Antigone as the role model for women of the entire world. It is witnessed through her splendid remark in *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* as, "Her example is always worth reflecting upon as a historical figure and as an identity and identification for many girls and women living today" (P. 02). They are absolutely the antediluvians or the beginners of feminist spirit. Both Antigone and Kannaki planted the seeds for the essence of feminist spirit that bloomed in the later age.

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