

# Subaltern Transgressors and Moral Superiority: Comparative Analysis of *Antigone* and *Anarkali*

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**ABSTRACT:** *Ascribing moral superiority to the protagonists of Antigone by Sophocles and Anarkali by Imtiaz Ali Taj, this article explores the inter-connectivity between the two characters apparently separated by their era, culture, geography and literary tradition. Focussing on the subaltern, it aims at deconstructing the social morality by raising the feminine issue to universal acclaim where the female transgressors are more of Dionysian goddesses—embodiment of the vigour of nature. Qualitative methodology has been applied by using the theoretical framework of Feminism and Deconstruction. For textual analysis, Antigone by Sophocles and Anarkali by Imtiaz Ali Taj have been used as primary texts. Through in-depth studies of the two plays, it aims at opening new vistas for the students of literature across culture, along with giving an insight to the social law makers and practitioners.*

**Keywords:** Subaltern, Anarkali, Taj, Antigone, Sophocles, Moral Superiority

Travelling the journey of several centuries, drama came in Urdu literature from its Greek pioneers. No matter what twists and turns it has been through and how many interpretations and schools of thought fill this gap of the centuries; Aristotle's Poetics is still considered the authority and the dramatists here still follow the Greek pattern of tragedy. This shows, that twenty one centuries down the road, the need of tragedy is as much there as it was in the golden period of Greek literature. However, this has given birth to a certain misconception among Asian dramatists. As Syed Waqar Azeem says that a few playwrights here believe that the play which has something sad and tragic in it, is tragedy; whereas the play having happy and light paraphernalia is comedy (289). But the situation is not so simple; tragedy has certain purpose to fulfil. It should bring out the stifling feelings and purge the spectators of the choking and suffocating emotions affecting their nerves. Similarly 'Rasa theory' has already been put forth in Natya Shastra by Bharata Muni well before poetics i.e. between 200BCE and 200 CE. Rasa theory maintains that along with entertainment, the main purpose of dramatic art is to make the audience realize personal consciousness that further makes them ponder over spiritual and moral questions. The desire is of that creative freedom that, like existentialists, place transcendence and personal morality above social expectations—that gives higher ground to Anarkali and Antigone. Drama/ Literature as the source of that social change (both inside and outside the dramatic world) is the desire of many who believe in change stimulated by the strong personal consciousness through theatrical experience-- as Brecht says in "On the Experimental Theatre":

If these endeavors are to attain a social consciousness then they must finally prepare the theatre to develop a view of life through artistic means, to develop models of the social life of human beings, in order to help the spectator to understand his social surroundings and to help him control them rationally and emotionally. (1961)

Through establishing the moral superiority of Antigone and Anarkali, by negating the demand of subservience to morality claimed by their antagonists, the contention intends to stir the mass consciousness—underscoring women emancipation much desired in Pakistan of the day. Before moving towards the analysis of the actual plays, it is mandatory to keep the Nietzschean controversy between intellect and nature at hand (*Reading Nietzsche* 136).

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In *Antigone*, Sophocles provides this by presenting the ill fate of Antigone and the same tradition is followed by the Pakistani writer Syed Imtiyaz Ali Taj in *Anarkali*. Along with catharsis, both the tragedies have certain similarities despite the time gap of thousands of years (*Antigone* was written two and half thousand centuries ago whereas *Anarkali* was written in 1922). This paper intends to draw a comparison between Antigone and Anarkali which highlights not only the universality of literature, tragedy, human suffering and feelings but also that in tragedy, Asian playwrights are still following the Greek traditions. Such a study will also give better understanding of the Asian tragedy when seen in the broader perspective and consequent application of encouraging personal moral consciousness. It further tells how the moral superiority and the undeserved suffering of the both make these the 'beautiful tragedies' they are.

Overall view of the tragedies agrees with the very notion. Both Antigone and Anarkali are females with inherent goodness of character; both are somehow related to the ruling family; and the fate and actions of both lead them to their tragic sufferings. Both are driven by their natural impulses; and indirectly challenge the very norms and values on which their society is based by performing some 'objectionable deed' (Whether the deed is really objectionable is a different debate). So, basically they form a bridge between nature and society, and try to achieve the balance at great cost.

The innocence and natural impulse in Antigone, while performing the burial ritual, takes the shape of the socially unacceptable affair in Anarkali. Both have inner goodness and purity which lead them to their actions and this goodness and purity eventually become their crime in the eyes of society and, mainly, in the eyes of authority. In order to subvert the moral superiority, the prime necessity is to witness the initial higher ground possessed by the antagonists. Both Antigone and Anarkali are judged by strong headed authority figures, who consider themselves responsible for the society they rule. The heroines are judged with the parameters of the already set traditional notions, which are actually transgressed by the both. The authority figures are males and are lordly, overbearing and proud of their authority and position; as Akbar says to his wife Maharani: "Still subcontinent is licking my feet like a meek dog" (76); and Creon says to Teiresias:

Bargain away! The silver gilt of Sardis,

All the gold of India, is not enough  
 To buy this man a grave. Not even if  
 Zeus's eagles come to fly away

With carrion morsels to their master's throne (199).

Creon and Akbar too, like Antigone and Anarkali, draw an interesting comparison; the overpowering and self-righteous figures judge the protagonist—their sons' loves under the traditional social beliefs, cause their sufferings, become the reason of their death, realize their error after the deed is done, and capture the focus of attention at the end while finding ways to deal with their detested existence. All this makes them tragic figures too, and makes meaning, in Derridian term, a water-like reality that slithers away. Deconstruction occurs in the name of subverting the binaries with unequal status. Both the parties hold claim in Deconstruction:

There are more than enough indications today to suggest we might perceive that these two interpretations of interpretation—which are absolutely irreconcilable even if we live them simultaneously and reconcile them in an obscure economy—together share the field which we call, in such a problematic fashion, the human sciences (Derrida, 9).

Apparently Creon and Akbar hold superior status; as the emperors they are the saviour of social values and tacitly possess higher moral ground. The article intends to subvert this claim and establish superiority of Antigone and Anarkali by speculating the plays.

The question of choices made at natural will by both heroines is explored in both plays. Antigone is prohibited by order to perform the burial ritual by Creon, and is warned against the consequent suffering on defiance by Ismene:

Think how much worse our end will be than all  
 The rest, if we defy our sovereign's edict  
 And his power. Remind ourselves that we  
 Are women, and as such not made to fight

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With men. For might unfortunately is right

And makes us bow to the things like this and worse (167).

This is the voice of socially acceptable *but* ordinary woman. By burying the body Antigone defies not actually the king but the ordinariness--which is there in the prudent and commonsensical Ismene and, so, is consequently left isolated. Honig says:

Critics split the two sisters into active and passive characters. The contrast highlights the exceptionality of Antigone, dramatizing her (in)human boldness in the face of impossibility. It also calls attention to the dimensions of tragedy most favoured by humanists and anti-humanists alike: the tragic thwarting of human aspiration and the isolation of the tragic hero by forces beyond the control of any individual, be these the gods, powerful men, or the cursed fate of one's family line (3).

Antigone is special and unique, so is Anarkali. This Ismene in *Antigone* takes the shape of the psychological conflict inside Anarkali, hence making the later psychologically more complex tragedy. So, the uniqueness of Anarkali makes her express her love in the presence of the king in his own castle, in the ceremony arranged for his honour—the same Anarkali who used to worry and think: “What will be the end of this!” (21). Taj has given the tragedy an Eastern shroud; hence the defiance of Anarkali is more of a silent protest. Where Antigone uses clear language to state her view, Anarkali takes the help of expressions and gestures<sup>1</sup>. But certainly her choice is not the choice of common person, it is the choice of a unique personality; it is the choice of a transgressor; it is the choice of Antigone; it is the choice of a tragic protagonist. Existentially speaking, both the protagonists are leading the authentic life in Sartrean terminology (*Existentialism is Humanism*). They suffer from angst; face the circumstances; decide for themselves; make the choices; accept their responsibility and bear the consequences. Instead of falling prey to in-authenticity or herd morality, they carve their own destiny. This bestows them the higher human ground than the inauthentic existences.

Analogy of the mother figures is there. Ismene performs this role and gives shrewd counsel to Antigone. In *Anarkali*, ‘Maa’, her mother, asks

her to act in the socially acceptable way. While going through the conflict, both the heroines ignore the prudent advice and act the way they think is right. This welcomes the fiasco which finally engulfs them.

It is usually believed that Antigone is taking stand against the less important laws made by men and is siding with the divine laws:

Creon: So you chose flagrantly to disobey my law?

Antigone: Naturally! Since Zeus never promulgated

Such a law. Nor will you find

That justice publishes such laws to man below.

I never thought your edicts had such force

They nullified the laws of heaven, which,

Unwritten, not proclaimed, can boast

A currency that everlasting is valid;

An origin beyond the birth of man (179).

Matthew S. Santirocco states in his article “Justice in Sophocles’ Antigone”:

If we ask of Antigone the same question she asked of herself – “What divine justice (*diken*) have I disobeyed?” --- the answer is “None.” But in a very real sense this is the wrong question. Although Antigone’s actions coincide with the requirements of *dike* (i.e. that the dead should not go unburied) they are not the result of any conscious concern for *dike*. Antigone’s motive was personal, and this, in some way, qualifies her response since it leads her to ignore the claims of society just as dramatically as Creon ignored the claims of the gods (12)

She is existentially relying on her personal guts and authentic perception. Antigone and Anarkali are personification of what O’Neill said in one of his letters: “Our tragedy is just that we have only ourselves, that there is nothing to be purged into except a belief in the guts of man, good or evil, who faces unflinchingly the black misery of his own soul!” (390).

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Anarkali similarly questions the claims of society and the authority of the king by following her natural passion of love, by starting an affair with Saleem and by fearlessly expressing her love in front of the king despite the cautionary alarms given by Saleem himself<sup>2</sup>. While ignoring the earthly king, she herself was the impulse of nature personified in the heaven of eternal king--as she describes this situation to Saleem later on:

The night of celebration?... Oh yes, you were there. In lights and scents, my life's desire was personified as Saleem. And I was there... only you and me... me and you... I was singing and you were smiling... I was dancing and you were ecstatic. *And the heaven was descended to earth...* (116) [Researcher's italics].

The will to protest against conventionality and man-made law is there in both heroines. On the contrary Both Akbar and Creon defy the naturally driven passions and firmly stand for man-made laws and traditions. The sense of good in Creon and Akbar is dogmatically conceived. Their notions are too narrow and boundaries so strictly based--- without any space for moral improvement<sup>3</sup>. Their notions are grounded on abstract social traditions where as Antigone and Anarkali show the authentic existence and act according to what comes from within; what is natural and true. So the victims are actually the agents of moral progress. Here another interesting notion can also be applied to the both i.e. since they are working according to what they think they should do. The element of 'should' is still there, though they are not following the orders of the kings, still they are working under the inherent womanhood they cannot escape. So the act of free-will is actually not so much of a free-will but of a pre-programmed sexuality in the both states. Fanny Soderback in "Feminist Readings of Antigone" states Sjolholm's claim:

When Antigone buries her brother, she does so because she must, not because she is manifesting an act of free will. In this way she is submitting to *eros*, who is forcing to love the dead and the cold. Her act is not merely an act of choice or a manifestation to be considered in ethical and political terms, but it must be understood as an act of submission to a sexuality she cannot escape (191).

If this was the act of submission to the sexuality she cannot escape, so is Anarkali's affair and its expression. Her feminine heart gets carried away with strong emotions --- a trait so typically associated with women.

However, the research witnesses that the free will *is* there; if not in the action then in the way the action is done in both the tragedies.

Moreover this engulfing emotionality raises them to the pedestal of mother goddesses—where they are ‘love and care givers’ irrespective of the consequences. In Kantian term, morality is gained through the process; it is not dependant on the ‘aim’:

An action from duty has its moral worth *not in the aim* that is supposed to be attained by it, but rather in the maxim in accordance with which it is resolved upon; thus that worth depends not on the actuality of the object of the action, but merely on the *principle of the volition*, in accordance with which the action is done, without regards to any object of the faculty of desire (Kant 15).

So, whether Anarkali gets Saleem or not, is not important. The point is both Antigone and Anarkali find the volition that is morally superior to murdering or imprisoning the innocent<sup>4</sup>. The very love and care is yearned by the antagonists. Inside the fortified mother mansion of Dionysian goddesses, even those men are yearning for warmth, love, forgetfulness and care. The Apollonian instinct of the dominated male is unable to provide any such solace and security. Only mother-goddesses are able to unite the men in the plays, as well as the readers, to that primordial unity they always yearn for and hardly achieve on their own. However, these women, consequently, have to pay its price.

Antigone and Anarkali are actually tied to a larger whole. They are not only living out their own fates but the fates of their families too. Their hard luck is that they are the part of the big nemesis and they must have to suffer for it. The curse of the house of Labdacus is still following Antigone. She is still paying the price of Oedipus’s patricide and his sleeping with his own mother. That is why Chorus says to Antigone: “You fell a plummet fall/ To pay a father’s sin” (193). The family curse which shapes Anarkali’s fate is poverty and servitude to the king. The most pinching thing for Akbar which leads him to the action is that such an action is done by a *Kameez* (maid); Akbar thinks aloud: “Ah Shaikhoo! You want Akbar’s maid to dance on Akbar’s chest”. Her talent becomes her murderer and the very name ‘Anarkali’ given to her at the peak of her good fortune eventually causes her doom. So it can be said that Imtiyaz Ali Taj has modernized the concept of family bonds and ‘related curses’ which are deeply rooted in Greek Tragedy.



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Antigone as well as Anarkali is obviously and persistently suicidal, when observed in the context of the perpetual fight. Throughout the play Antigone flirts with and is in love with the notion of death. In the opening lines she says to Ismene: The worst that I can suffer and the best: A death which martyrdom can render blest” (168). She not only considers death the best option for her but also intentionally leads herself to the self-destruction. As Maria Cimitile writes while reviewing Judith Butler’s “Antigone’s Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death”:

To call upon the gods, as Antigone does, is to reach out for death in a masochistic desire. In this way, Lacan views Antigone as importing death into life, exemplified by her living tomb, and thus as the image of the irresolvable coincidence of life and death (5).

The same is the case with Anarkali; right after Dilaraam comes to know about her secret affair, Anarkali says to her sister Sorayya: “I should die Sorayya” and then “I cannot stay anywhere but in the realm of death” (50). Even in her unconscious, there is the desire to leave that place, to transcend the earth and reach the horizon (41). Later on through her actions she brings the catastrophe to her; she herself prepares and walks on the pathway to death in her ‘living tomb’. So her death in a way, just like Antigone’s death, is as much suicidal as it was ordained. Taking life so lightly and playing with death is what make them the protagonists; and the secret suicidal desire which leads them to self destruction is what makes them tragic.

Both Creon and Akbar think that they are acting for the well-being of their respective societies and in their views they become better citizens by punishing the transgressors. But the reality is quite opposite in both the tragedies because actually both male antagonists are tyrant and egotistical. What they want to save is their reign and their wealth not the morals of the society. They are not only tyrants but also the creatures of restricted vision led by the fear and ambition. They both are unable to resist the temptations of power. No doubt Antigone dies eventually but her moral superiority proves her a better citizen by wining all votes and Creon is left deserted by his family, condemned by Teiresias and criticized by the chorus. Winnington-Ingram writes:

It is she [Antigone] whose attitudes towards the great issues are truly significant, whereas those of Creon are trite and

deliberately diminished by the dramatist. She upholds the ancient sanctities of the family and proves herself the better citizen thereby (148).

Akbar also receives the same desertion and condemnation from his family and the readers; as Rani taunts his sole ambition to win and rule and holds him responsible for destroying the children and causing the irreparable suffering to the mothers (150). In this way, contrary to Akbar, Anarkali is the perfect citizen who sees before-hand what is right and has courage to follow her perception just like Antigone. People do admire the actions of the heroines but do not have the courage of the protagonists to gain that perfection by risking their lives. Common people do not even have the courage to appreciate the action in front of the authority which the exceptional tragic hero/heroine performs daringly by looking in the eyes of his/her death.

Another interesting analogy is that the people in conflict in both the tragedies belong to the opposite sexes. The actions of Antigone and Anarkali appear more like crimes because of their womanhood. Just like in West/East discussion (where the point is of marginalization), the women in this scenario are 'subaltern-ized'. It is their gender, its attached notions and the conventionally accepted role which make them more of a violator and transgressor in a patriarchal society<sup>5</sup>—who are just making an effort for living Simone de Beauvoir's version of authentic life. That is why when Creon buries Eteocles, it is a normal deed but when Antigone buries Polyneices, she is doomed; and that is why although Saleem and Anarkali both love each other but only Anarkali is sentenced to death; and perhaps that is why when Akbar openly entitles Anarkali the nightingale of heaven and the earthly Aphrodite as well as uses for her the expressions of burning flame (95) and magician who produces music from the strings of Akbar's heart (96) it is acceptable<sup>6</sup>; but when Anarkali sends silent messages of love to Saleem she is put behind the bars. To claim that Akbar's own amorous interest in Anarkali actually causes the ruthless separation of the lovers is a different debate; but this action does have its roots in sexuality and its attached traditional notions. In the definition of these traditional notions these females are doomed. Their words and actions are transgressing the boundaries of silence and obedience that is expected of them both socially and epistemologically<sup>7</sup>.

So Taj and Sophocles both are indirectly questioning the double standards of morality in a human society, which were there in Greek society two thousand and five hundred years ago and which are still here

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in this twenty first century society. The very concern of Akbar after knowing Saleem's stance is that "Subcontinent is cheaper than a woman?" he laments "Ah my dreams! They were less valuable than a woman's playfulness! ... Conqueror of Subcontinent was destined to be defeated by a maid" (125) and calls Saleem the one who has sold his father at the cost of a beautiful woman's eyes (127).

Same is the dilemma of Creon whose masculine pride is hurt by Antigone's taking up a man's role and demanding to be treated as equal. The conventional female subservience that is in Ismene, is reflected in her words: "Remind ourselves that we/ Are women, and as such not made to fight/ With men" (167). Antigone threatens Creon's masculinity by taking up stance against him and proving herself to be a better moral, social, political and religious soul; that is why revengeful Creon claims: "O she's the man, not I, if she can walk/ Away unscathed!" (180) Full of manly pride he utters: "No woman while I live shall govern me" (182) and after locking up the sisters he believes: "They are women now" (184). What is indigestible for Creon is the female dignity's stand against male dominance. Had a man done the same act, Creon would have dealt the matter in a different light; as he says: "you must/ Not lose your balance for a woman's sake" (186) and also: "If yield/ We must, then better yield to man, than have/ It said that we were worsted by a woman" (187).

Basically both Antigone and Anarkali claim for feminine dignity and the status they deserve; which threatens the male dominance and, in terms of psychoanalysis, they feel the anxiety of castration complex; due to which they are offended and, consequently, judge the acts of women in context of their gender. That is why they take revenge from them by further restricting their sexuality. As Hanson presents an argument that in Greek culture upper cervix (neck) is believed to be somehow related to the lower cervix (uterus); so, by restricting the working of neck i.e. by killing them, they are taking revenge not from the deviants but particularly from the female transgressors (328). That is why their 'living tomb' is their 'marriage chamber'.

Both Creon and Akbar are made aware of the alternative course of action. Teiresias and Haemon talk to Creon, the former says to him:

Think, son, think! To err is human, true,

And only he is cursed who having sinned  
 Will not repent, will not repair. He is  
 A fool, a proved and stubborn fool. Give death  
 His due, and do not kick a corpse.  
 Where is renown to kill a dead man twice?  
 Believe me, I advise you well.  
 It should be easy to adopt advice  
 Which is entirely for your good estate (199).

Similarly Akbar is made aware of the better course of action through Maharani who advises him to let Saleem marry Anarkali in order to win their son back (126), still the dominant male figures perform according to their 'social-will', condemn the transgressing females and cause tragedy of the protagonists.

The notion of 'sin' done by the protagonist, judged in the light of conventionality consequently leading them to the "scape-goat sacrifice" which causes enlightenment of the blind followers of the tradition is the pattern followed by both Sophocles and Taj in *Antigone* and *Anarkali* respectively. Death of both the protagonists leaves the tradition-followers enlightened and it gives a bleak hope of a better future; Creon repents so:

God, this sin, my sin,  
 Can never be forgiven.  
 I killed her, I  
 Can own no alibi.  
 Take me quickly  
 Take me servants hence,  
 And let me be forgotten (209).

Similarly Akbar by the end calls himself "cruel father" and laments with tearful eyes: "Oh God! Who knew this would

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happen!” (147); this assures that society will be renewed by moving towards better future through the enlightenment. Both plays end with the spot light on the surviving male figures who, after realizing their fault are scrabbling their ways to the improved life; but this improved life can only be achieved if the subaltern’s voice is given the centre of social acceptability. In the words of Judith Roof: “Change can only come when the illusion of Law’s hegemony is dissolved. When the Symbolic and the Social embrace, a new Law might be born, something more akin to the social practices of human existence, and others will speak as others no more” (7).

### Notes

1. Bigsby writes: “At the level of language lies are possible; at the level of instinctual behaviour, of gesture, and of unconscious impulse there is an available truth” (138).
2. Here being, in words of Heidegger, “is defined as a power-to-be” (Molina 63) and the freedom adds to his/her authenticity.
3. According to Kant (from Kant: The Moral Order) the morally right actions are judged from their intention i.e. morality is deontological. In that way the morality of Anarkali and Antigone was shaped out of love and care; whereas morality of the antagonists’ was shaped out of revenge. Moreover the other maxim of moral superiority is its universalizability. One can see that pure love or burial of dead can be made universal law; whereas ordering not to bury the dead or murdering the slave girl can hardly qualify for it. Thirdly, Antigone and Anarkali claim for moral superiority because Kant’s doctrine on Morality snubs using someone as means and not as end—something that Creon and Akbar do.
4. Even if they were against the law of the king, their acts were sanctioned by divine law, and hence, by universal law i.e. “Not to choose otherwise than so that the maxims of one’s choice are at the same time comprehended with it in the same volition as the universal law” (Kant 58).
5. “If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (Spivak 82-83). Again: “The woman is doubly in shadow” (84).
6. This also gives higher moral ground to Anarkali according to Kant: “It is not enough that we ascribe freedom to our will, on whatever grounds, if we do not also have sufficient grounds to attribute the same quality also to all rational beings” (Kant 64).
7. “Yet the assumption and construction of a consciousness or subject sustains such work and will, in the long run, cohere with the work of imperialist subject-constitution, mingling epistemic violence with the advancement of learning and civilization. And the subaltern woman will be as mute as ever” (Spivak 90).

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