

---

**Fifth Century Greek Patriarchal Norms and its Resistance: Relooking into Sophocles' *Electra* and *Antigone***

---

**Asra Afrin**, Research Scholar, Department of English, VSKUB.

**Prof. Robert Jose**, Professor in English, Department of English, VSKUB.

---

**Article Received:** 13/08/2024

**Article Accepted:** 15/09/2024

**Published Online:** 16/09/2024

**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2024.6.9.124

---

**Abstract**

This article examines the roles, resistance, and heroic actions of Electra and Clytemnestra in *Electra* and Antigone and Ismene in *Antigone* of Sophocles. The paper throws light on the construction of gender in Greek society and the resisting female characters from the Sophoclean tragedies, *Electra* and *Antigone*. Fifth-century Greek society was patriarchal. Sophoclean female characters are heroic. They challenge the social and cultural norms of their time. The paper analyzes the actions of women characters in the select tragedies who take up the tasks that are considered to be the acts of men. The paper focuses on the female characters resisting the norms that subordinate them and subject them to be inferior to men. The article highlights the actions of female characters who take up the roles and rights that were considered to be of men in fifth-century Greek society. It shows women in these two plays resist the gender roles and norms of their time.

**Key Words:** Patriarchy, Resistance, Mythology, Masculine role, Feminine role

**Introduction:**

The article attempts to examine the heroic, manly, and resisting speech and actions of women characters from *Electra* and *Antigone*. The women characters who challenge the norms at familial, cultural, and public levels are the source of study in this article. The reason for examining women characters from two thousand five-hundred-year-old works of art is that they are different from the women of their time. These women characters are exceptional in their thinking, dreaming, planning, action, and decision-making. Sophoclean tragedies depict characters from Greek mythology. The story of *Electra* and *Antigone* are mythological stories that Sophocles represented with desired changes. *Electra* has three female characters and a chorus of women. *Antigone* has two female characters: Antigone and her sister Ismene. The women characters of Sophocles tragedies are heroic. They are determined, confident, and bold enough to oppose what they think is against the moral code or what is necessary to say and do from their point of view. Their perspectives, verbal speech, and actions that contradict the social/ cultural laws are

often supported by religious laws (divine intervention; the willingness of gods or calamities as an indication of the anger of gods against the characters who stand against these female protagonists). The Greek literary texts are read and reread in the light of new theories. The female protagonists' language and actions are closely observed by critics and writers. One of the reasons presented by Judith Butler in the case of Antigone, as pointed out by Vervek, is that "The reason Antigone can be employed in a contemporary context to speak about resistance is that Butler believes her to be making a demand within the language of the state and, in doing so, to be acting with the agency" (Willow Verkerk 283). However, the speech and actions of the women characters from *Electra* and *Antigone* are looked at in this article to find out how the women in the texts oppose the norms practiced in society.

Fifth-century Greece was a male-dominant or patriarchal society. With the establishment of democracy, old forms of governments disappeared, but this brought little change in society and much more change in literary characters as the women characters in *Antigone* and *Electra* demonstrate heroism and resistance to the norms that existed in the fifth century. The Sophoclean female characters are democratic in their thoughts and actions. Women didn't have the right to vote, speak publicly, buy properties, wage wars, take revenge on enemies, or place in the public sphere. These were the acts of men. McClure explains, "To be a citizen meant to participate actively in the speech of the city, whether in the courts, the Council, the Assembly, or the agora" (08). It is evident through Greek tragedies that women didn't have the right to buy property or run businesses. Men were the masters of women. But Electra, Clytemnestra, and Antigone do not hesitate to overthrow the thoughts of their time. They exhibit freedom of choice in speech as well as in action, not frightened of the consequences. They take up the roles that were considered men's duties and actions. These characters show resistance to patriarchal norms. They cross the patriarchal rule that the place of a woman is in the domestic sphere and the place of a man is in the political or public sphere (Oikos and Polis).

Clytemnestra takes up the masculine right to speak publicly. "She ignores the expected propriety of women's behavior in terms of public and private speech and speaks out with great boldness" (Nickerson 21). Clytemnestra defending herself not only speaks publicly but also splendidly resists the custom of sacrificing girls to please gods and goddesses. Not only in Sophocles' play *Electra*, Clytemnestra resists patriarchal norms and acts like a man, but also in Aeschylus' play, she shows boldness like men. She kills her husband Agamemnon when he returns from Troy. Nickerson emphasizes that "Clytemnestra switches between playing a masculine and feminine role. Her masculine role, which is most clearly seen in the language she uses and the actual murder at the end of the play, allows her to gain the power needed to take revenge on her husband" (10).

Clytemnestra is neither silent nor hesitating to accept that she has murdered her husband. Men were the masters and heads of the families, and women followed their word, but Clytemnestra contradicted this by killing her master. She kills

Agamemnon, justifies her act, and criticizes the custom of sacrificing girls. The dialogue by Clytemnestra needs observation:

Because this father of yours-the one you're always  
Weeping about- was the only Greek hard-hearted enough  
To sacrifice a girl to the gods- your sister. The pain he took  
To father her was nothing like the pain I had in giving birth.  
All right. Can you convince me he had a reason to sacrifice her?  
For what? For the Greeks? They had no business killing a girl  
Who belonged to me. . . . (*Electra* lines 530-536).

Clytemnestra is unsurpassed. She loves her daughter so much that she not only kills Agamemnon for sacrificing her daughter to the gods but opposes the ritual of sacrifice. With this, she takes a stance against the religious law of the time. She is brave enough to accept that she has killed her husband as a vengeance for her daughter's sacrifice. She doesn't repent for her act till the end. Rather, she celebrates it as a victory over her enemy. Electra refers to the celebration of a feast arranged by Clytemnestra soon after the murder of Agamemnon:

She killed my father after tricking him.  
And on that day, she has a festival  
Of sacred dance and sacrifices to the gods (lines 279-81).

Clytemnestra, like a brave warrior celebrating his victory at the death of his enemy in a war, celebrates the feast, though this feast is a funeral ritual the Greeks practiced at the gravesite. She is not guilty of her act. She is bold, confident, and daring. She is neither afraid of her community nor of her children, as she thinks her act of murder is just. Moreover, she makes a very reasonable point that triggers the mind of the audience. She repeatedly tells Agamemnon that he deserved the murder as he killed his daughter. She opposes religious law and attempts to please the gods. She sacrifices animals as a ritual after the death of Agamemnon. She tries to threaten the religious practices that subject women to oppression; on one hand, and on the other hand, she shows people that she believes in religious law and gods just as the women of her time did. Clytemnestra's speech against the sacrifice of her daughter Iphigenia can be compared with the speech of a warrior of the Greek army, Aias, who criticizes the daughter of Zeus, Athena, for treachery. As Aias doesn't hesitate to speak against the goddess and plans to kill the rulers, Clytemnestra, too, plans to kill the ruler Agamemnon. Aias fails in his ambition, whereas Clytemnestra succeeds in her plan with her wit.

Women in fifth-century Greece had many roles to play in religious spheres. They became priestesses of the goddesses, participated in the parthenaic procession, and gave baths to the statues of goddesses. Women made offerings to gods and goddesses. The historical monuments and buildings contain a note. The note contains the names of the women who made offerings along with the names of their fathers, brothers, or husbands. Women didn't have their own/separate identities.

Their identity was based on the identity of the male members of the family. The headstones in the cemetery also contained the names of the dead women with the names of their masters-men of the family. The Greek men and women offered libations to the graves. Both women and men visited the gravesites. Orestes, at the beginning of the play, offers libations at the grave of Agamemnon. Chrysothemis' gifts-bearing visits to her father's tomb provide evidence that women did visit their family members' graves. The following lines from the play *Electra* through light on the practice of tomb visiting:

CHRYSOTHEMIS. When I came to Father's tomb on the ancient mound,  
I saw fresh streams of milk springing from the top (lines 893-94).

Women experienced full freedom in religious rituals. Funerary customs were part of the religious conventions, so women were not restricted from arranging feasts for their deceased or visiting their graves. Women were considered weaker than men. Wailing, crying, and grieving were the signs associated with women. Women remained at home, looking after the household tasks, and men were responsible for earning bread and butter for the family. A reference to this belief and practice is found in the *Oedipus at Colonus*. Men waged wars, disclosing their bravery. Many references to the subordination of women have been made in Sophoclean tragedies. Women were considered weaker than men. An instance of it is as follows:

CHRYSOTHEMIS. Can't you see? You're a woman. That's your nature.  
You're not a man; you're not as strong as your enemies in a fight (lines 997-98).

*Electra* and Chrysothemis are different in their thinking, speech, and action. Where Chrysothemis reflects the typical noblewoman who accepts the socio-cultural norms and is submissive to the authorities, *Electra* is more courageous and contradictory. She is a courageous woman who wants to take revenge for her father's murder. She suffers from pain for several years, but her hatred towards Clytemnestra has not come to an end. Nickerson believes *Electra* plays both feminine and masculine roles. He says, "*Electra* does her female duty of mourning for her lost kin, and through this loyalty to her male relative, she is the ideal Athenian woman. . . . However, she also plays a transgressive female role as a result of the extremity of her mourning . . ." (31). *Electra* mourns the death of her father for a long. She gives up her luxurious life and freedom for the sake of mourning and grieving. Nickerson argues that *Electra* resists the existing government through her mourning:

Through her mourning, *Electra* is resisting the ruling government that has been set over her, however unjust and corrupt that government might be. It makes sense, then, that the society of Classical Athens was afraid of what women could accomplish by being allowed some form of public speech. In this way, *Electra* is not behaving as a quiet, submissive woman. Instead, she rebels against the rulers of the city and calls for revenge on her father's murderers (32).

Nickerson's argument can be accepted. The plan of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus to kill Electra (as told by Chrysothemis) manifests that Electra's mourning troubled them to a greater extent. She uses her pain to give pain to her enemies. Electra grieves in public, that is, before the chorus women. She is involved in arguments with her mother in public, and both Clytemnestra and Electra are involved in a formal dialogue in public, just like a legal suit proceeds in the Assembly. Nickerson believes, "This, as we have seen, is the freedom of speech associated with a healthy (male) political system and specifically with democracy as opposed to tyranny" (381). As was seen in the very first description of Clytemnestra in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra and now Electra take part in "παρρησία" 'free speech.' By laying claim to this masculine right, Clytemnestra and Electra both act like Athenian citizen men" (43). However, she doesn't stop with mourning and crying. She fearlessly plans to kill her mother, Clytemnestra, as revenge for her father's death. She believes her abilities and strength just as a man would believe and thinks of taking revenge and tells her sister to join her in punishing Clytemnestra for the murder of their father. Electra yearns for her brother to come and take revenge for her father's murder. She resists the social belief that women are weak. After hearing the news of Orestes' death, she plans to finish her enemies by herself. Her sister tells her that she is weak as she is a woman and doesn't have the strength to fight. Electra is heroic and breaks the belief that women are weak. She believes in herself and decides to punish her mother and Aegisthus for killing Agamemnon, but she never submits to Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. She abuses her mother before the chorus women and keeps mourning and reminding people of the crime done by Clytemnestra. The words of her sister don't break her down. Rather, she becomes strong as the play proceeds. She waits for her brother Orestes to come in the beginning to take revenge. She fails to persuade her sister to join her plan to kill her mother. Though alone without the support of her sister and in the absence of her brother, Electra by herself decides to kill her mother. Nickerson believes "Electra admits that she has decided to take on a traditionally masculine role and take things into her own hands. She will pursue what she knows is not a woman's prerogative and avenge her father's death" (39). The idea of revenge and its execution was believed to be the role of a man. "The desire for vengeance derives from the great sense of honor and duty present in Classical Athens. It was the duty of the family members of the person murdered to exact vengeance on the person who had done the murdering" (37). Electra, like a hero, warrior, and nobleman of the fifth century, plans to kill her mother without any support from any male member. As Aias decides to slay the corrupt rulers, Electra, too, stands all alone against the people in power. Nickerson comments, "Electra's readiness to kill her mother and her ability to come up with a plan shows her intelligence and deviousness. She clearly plays a stronger masculine role than Orestes. Furthermore, in the killings themselves, Electra shows herself to have more courage than Orestes" (46).

Electra's masculine actions or the resisting actions do not end here. She

dreams of high respect and glory, as a nobleman would expect. Electra stands against Clytemnestra for murdering Agamemnon. Electra also attempts to persuade her sister, Chrysothemis, to join her in killing the enemies of their father. Electra's ways are different from her sister's. She is ready to sacrifice her comforts, freedom, and life to achieve her goal. She openly resists her mother and tells of her deeds to the world. Electra dreams of great deeds like a nobleman would dream of. She desires to gain fame in the public. She expects glory honor from citizens and foreigners:

“Look, my friends, this is the pair of sisters  
Who saved their father’s house? They staked their lives  
On this, when their enemies were all ensconced,  
To bring them to account for murder.  
Everyone should love and treat them with respect.  
In festivals or assemblies of the city, everyone  
Should honor them for manly courage” that  
Is the way they all will boast us then,  
And glorious fame will follow us in life or death (lines 977-985).

Electra's persuading speech to achieve glory and honor in assemblies of the city and festivals is similar to the speeches of the Greek heroes who would talk about gaining respect and power in public. She once again breaks the boundaries of gender by aspiring to achieve respect and glory at the public level. "However, she ignores the fact that it is the duty of men to defend women's honor, not the duty of women to defend men's. She furthermore continues in this masculine role by using terms typical of heroic language and tries to tempt Chrysothemis with visions of glory" (Nickerson 41). Electra expects masculine awards and prizes. She thinks of executing justice as the duty of the Athenian citizen alone. Punishing Clytemnestra and Aegisthus is referred to in the play as justice. Thus, she even thinks of ensuring justice like a king. She not only refutes the laws and practices of the time but also plans to carry out masculine actions.

Chrysothemis' thoughts are culturally constructed. She represents the submissive, ideal woman who, in the absence of a male member of the family, submits to the rulers or the people in power. She thinks submitting to people in power and accepting that you are a woman and weak is intelligence. She believes women are weaker than men, and to win against Clytemnestra, they must have a courageous man on their side. She considers Clytemnestra strong as she has a male member (Aegisthus) on her side. Chrysothemis is sure that standing against her mother is nothing but foolishness because she and Aegisthus are powerful. She requires a man to execute the brave acts. She feels happy seeing the fresh flowers and milk flowing from her father's tomb, which is an indication of Orestes's arrival. Chrysothemis enjoys freedom and comfort by pretending to be faithful to Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. She doesn't like to be as sentimental as Electra. Chrysothemis uses the mind to get out of her troubles. A dialogue from the play

*Electra* reflects the image of a woman through her very own words:

If I were strong enough, I'd show them what I think of them,  
But I have decided that in a storm, it's best to slacken sail  
And not pretend to take action when you're causing them  
no pain . . . (*Electra* lines 334-337).

Chrysothemis doesn't show her hatred for her enemies. Rather, she pretends to be good to them, wins their trust, and enjoys her freedom. She believes she is weak as she is a woman and cannot cause any pain to her enemies. She seems to be a realistic person who doesn't imagine struggling against powerful enemies. She accepted that she was a woman and couldn't stand against the powerful Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. But she has not accepted them as her friends. She hates them and waits for the right time and right opportunity.

Antigone, Electra, and Clytemnestra are bold and confident and transgress the gender roles. They undertake the acts that are meant for men. Antigone stands against the ruler, Creon. She, in public, refuses the decree of the king. Butler believes that Antigone challenges her gender by speaking publicly when she refuses Creon's demands (*Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death*). She opposes the system not just at the domestic level but also at the public level. She is more rebellious. Judith Butler tells about her resistance to.

Antigone's agency is grounded in her performative refusal of Creon's edict: firstly, through burying Polyneices' body and secondly, in her public refusal of his authority. By adopting the language of Creon and speaking in the public domain (in a place that was exclusive to men), she momentarily usurps him, speaking like a man, she silences him and threatens to make him feminine" (*Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* 09).

Antigone, like Electra, is a girl of good conduct. She is a daughter for whom her familial relations are more than political orders. She, like other Sophoclean protagonists, is a believer in the divine. She believes in the laws of the divine and is ready to take any action to fulfill her duty, especially towards her family. She loves her family and brothers more than her life. In the play *Oedipus at Colonus*, she is portrayed as a girl who is more obedient to her father. Even when presented as a good daughter, she crosses gender boundaries as she goes out in the woods to look after her blind father. She, like a responsible son, arranges food and shelter for him. She resists the cultural rule that men go out and look after the family members. She secretly meets her old father, wandering in the woods after exile from Thebes, and looks after him. Willow Verkerk, in his article "Heroism in Sophocles's Antigone," says, "Antigone is familiar with speaking publicly because she has been her father's eyes during his exile" (*Philosophy and Literature* 287). She gives up the comforts of the palace and wanders in deserts with her suffering father. After Oedipus's death, she returns to the palace in Thebes. Here, we see her speaking publicly and

resisting the decree of king Creon. At Thebes, she finds her brothers being fought against each other and killed each other as it was prophesized. Antigone buries the dead body of her brother Polynikes against the decree of king Creon. For Butler, "Antigone comes, then, to act in ways that are called manly not only because she acts in defiance of the law but also because she assumes the voice of the law in committing the crime against the law. She not only does the deed, refusing to obey the edict, but she also does it again by refusing to deny that she has done it, thus appropriating the rhetoric of agency from Creon himself" (11).

Antigone strongly believes in the divine or unwritten law and fulfills her responsibility towards her dead brother, opposing the feminine roles posed by society. Ruman believes ". . . Whereas Ismene is the appropriate, beautiful girl; Antigone curses her girlhood. Antigone, in particular, manifests her hatred for the ideal of femininity" (02). He further says, "Ismene is reasonable, timid, and obedient to patriarchal state law. In contrast, Antigone is obstinate, impulsive, moody, and decidedly resistant to being a girl like the rest. Rather, she is ruled by conscience or instinct and obeys the 'unwritten law' when it clashes with human law (02).

Antigone, her sister Ismene, and Creon's wife are female characters in the play *Antigone*. Antigone and Ismene take up the difficult tasks that are thought to be the duty of men. Oedipus, in his old age, is cared for by his daughters and not by his sons. Antigone and Ismene break the patriarchal image of women by opposing King Creon and refusing to go to Thebes with Creon. Ismene supports her sister, saying:

I did the deed if she will have it so,  
And my sister claims to share the guilt (Antigone 145).

Ismene is not involved in the act of burial, but she ". . . does not passively disappear after refusing Antigone's request. Rather, she publicly stands with Antigone, hoping to receive punishment by her side" (Kirkpatrick 402). Though clear resisting actions are not done by Ismene, she, at a certain level, tries to resist Creon to save her sister. She is not like Electra or Antigone, who openly challenge the norms and the authorities and take up the roles of men. In the play Oedipus at Colonus, Ismene also rides the horse and comes into the woods to meet her father. The refusal is a sign of women's right to make decisions in their lives. Antigone is a woman of good conduct. She is cultured and rebellious in her actions. She respects the religious, political, and social laws but knows her freedom and her duty towards the family. Antigone refutes the decree of King Creon and buries the dead body of her brother Polynikes without any hesitation or guilt. She puts herself at risk like a courageous man. Antigone's speech can be compared with the then-political speakers who persuaded the audience in the Assembly. Antigone bravely opposes the rules of the king, saying:

Nor did I deem that thou, a mortal man,  
Could'st by a breath annul and override  
The immutable unwritten laws of Heaven (Antigone 142).



Antigone, like a noble fighter, takes the stand against the King, and when he captivates her, she endures the pain of death. She wholeheartedly invites her death, just like the Greek heroes Aias, Achilles, etc. The act of murder is often presented as a respectful deed in Greek mythology. The Greek heroes were never frightened of dying. In fact, they would use suicide as a tool to defeat their enemies. Aias slays himself, kicking against his enemies who thought of punishing him severely. Likewise, Antigone also commits suicide before Creon passes a verdict to kill her. Even while dying, she resists the political law and the authority of the king.

**Conclusion:**

Sophoclean female characters resist and are heroic in terms of the way they think of themselves and the actions they perform. Both Electra and Antigone perform heroic actions. Chrysothemis and Ismene represent the ideal women of the time who dislike the patriarchal norms or, at times, feel they should go against the norms, but they dare not to do so. They do not perform courageous tasks, but they remain struggling with the system in their own ways. They do not silently accept the social and cultural system. Their ways of opposing are different from each other. Antigone and Electra are so brave that they put their lives at risk to resist their enemies or the system. Chrysothemis and Ismene show their resistance by their words. Clytemnestra, Electra, and Chrysothemis oppose the social/cultural norms and the patriarchal construction of gender. Clytemnestra, the antagonist of the play *Electra*, is a very influential character. Both the protagonist and the antagonist seem to be opposing the system or the socio-cultural norms in their own ways. Clytemnestra is as courageous as Electra. Both have justice on their side. Though Clytemnestra is shown as the antagonist of the play *Electra*, her reason for killing Agamemnon is noteworthy. Her action to kill her husband indicates her defiance of the religious sacrifice of girls. She looks at Agamemnon as a murderer of her daughter. She directly opposes the religious law of sacrifice. Her action forces the audience to rethink such superstitious rituals that cause women to suffer.

**References:**

- Butler, Judith. *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death*. The Welleck Library Lecture, 2000.
- Due, Casey. *The Captive Woman's Lament in Greek Tragedy*.
- Fantham, Elaine, et al. *Women in the Classical World*. New York Oxford University Press 1994.
- Kirkpatrick, Jennett. "The Prudent Dissident: Unheroic Resistance in Sophocles Antigone". *The Review of Politics*. Pp. 401-424.  
ResearchGate. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670511003421>
- Nickerson, Bethany. *Rebellious Performances: An Examination of the Gender Roles of Clytemnestra and Electra*. 22 March 2012. John Gilbert, Honors Thesis.

- Ruman, Md. Abdul Karim. *Antigone: A Tragedy of Human Conflicts and Divine Intervention*. Vol. 1, No. 2, June 2012, pp. 33–40. ResearchGate.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/268816301\\_Antigone\\_A\\_Tragedy\\_of\\_Human\\_Conflicts\\_and\\_Divine\\_Intervention](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/268816301_Antigone_A_Tragedy_of_Human_Conflicts_and_Divine_Intervention)Sophocles. *Antigone*. Gibbons, Reginald, and Charles Segal, translators. OUP, 2003.
- Sophocles: Four Tragedies*. Translated by Peter Meineck & Paul Woodruff, Hackett Publishing Company, 2007
- Sophocles*. Translated by F. Storr, Harvard UP.
- Smith, Helaine L. *Master Pieces of Classic Greek Drama*. Greenwood Press, London, 2006.
- Verkerk, Willow. “Heroism in Sophocles’s Antigone”. *Philosophy and Literature*. Vol. 38, No. 1, April 2014, pp. 282–291.  
[https://muse.jhu.edu./login?auth=0&type=summary&url=journals/philosophy\\_and\\_literature/v038/38.1.verkerk.pdf](https://muse.jhu.edu./login?auth=0&type=summary&url=journals/philosophy_and_literature/v038/38.1.verkerk.pdf)