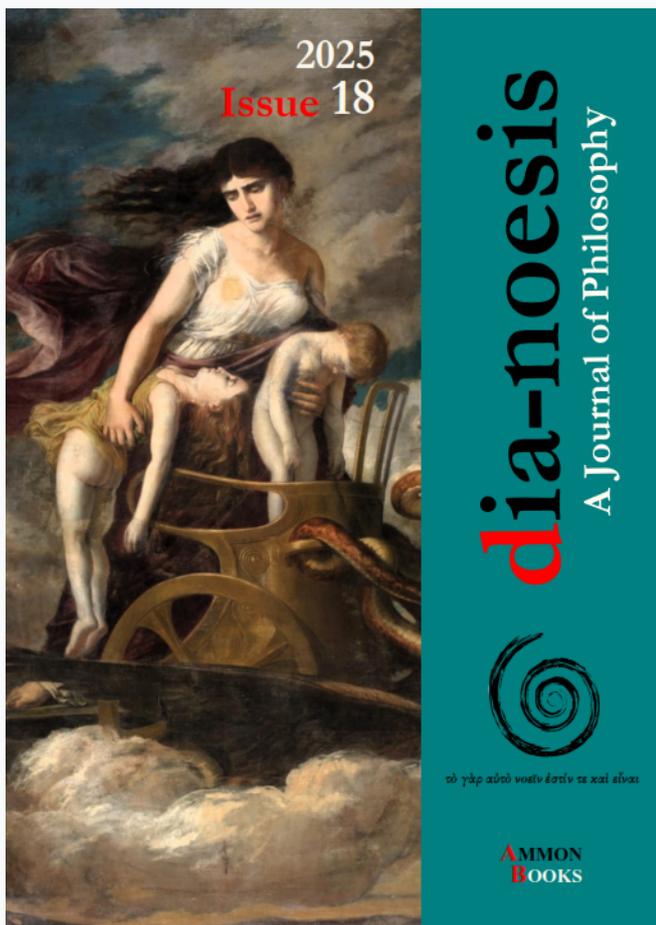


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Trauma, Exile, and Cultural Displacement



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## Lamentation, Exile, Trauma in Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Ajax*

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### Abstract

Sophocles' *Antigone*, performed in 442 BCE, and *Ajax* in 442 BCE are twin responses to social ostracization and exile in a world where heroism was being redefined. While the plays were performed before the historic Peloponnesian War, they are responses to the topical war with Persia that Sophocles had witnessed firsthand. The "Seven against Thebes," the popular civil war which has Polynices and Eteocles, two brothers locked in a bitter fratricidal battle for the throne against Creon's rule, is central to *Antigone*. *Ajax* is about the Trojan war, which ends with the mental breakdown of the eponymous hero, Ajax, as he was denied the mantle of Achilles because of Odysseus, Menelaus, and Agamemnon. The central conflict in *Antigone* is between civic duty and personal morality, while in *Ajax*, it is more subjectivized and interiorized inner conflict. The plays trace the breakdown of language due to trauma, and move away from the symbolic to the semiotic and the maternal as expressed in lamentations and agony, using onomatopoeic Greek words before the suicides of the protagonists. The plays are closer to the Dionysian mode that is linked to orgiastic ecstasy, passion, and darkness (Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 1990). In *Antigone*, the central conflict is between the king's edict and the sacred duty to the dead. In *Ajax*, it is neurosis and hallucination, which leads to the mass slaughter of livestock mistaken for the Greek heroes who were his enemies. The plays are poignant

responses to the collective trauma created by war, and a sense of dislocation, alienation in a world that is suddenly bereft of meaning. The suicides of the protagonists are cathartic, a comment on the shifting political and social climate of Athens.

**Keywords:** *Greek Tragedy, Dionysian, Exile, Semiotic, Lamentation, War, Trauma, Tragic Alienation*

*Never a bride, never a mother, unfriended,  
Condemned alive to solitary death.  
-Sophocles, Antigone*

*Oh! Darkness is now my only light; the gloom of the under-  
world shines from me. Take me! Take me to the halls of death.  
-Sophocles, Ajax*

Aristotle's *Poetics* 330 BCE defines the genre of tragedy in a structured manner based on the unity of time and space. He says, "Tragedy, then, is a representation of an action that is worth serious attention, complete in itself, and of some amplitude, in language enriched by a variety of artistic devices appropriate to the several parts of the play; presented in the form of action, not narration; by means of pity and fear bringing about the purgation of such emotion" (Aristotle, 1965). This linear and evolutionary conception of tragedy was based on the overall cathartic effect that encouraged purgation of pity and fear to heal the community. The individual, as a tragic hero's unique dilemmas, delusions, and courage specific to him/her that are told through a story issuing forth from his/her hamartia or fatal flaw. In the post-Enlightenment and early Modern phase, these views of tragedy were revisited by the German thinker Frederick Nietzsche in his *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music* (1872).

Nietzsche's conception of the tragic emotion and tragic catharsis came to be linked to darker, subterranean emotions of alienation, exile, and inner breakdown of the protagonist in the middle of an

increasingly lonesome universe. According to Nietzsche, Greek Tragedy commingled two opposing forces borrowing names from Greek Gods—Apollo and Dionysius. Apollo represented beauty, grace, the sun, reason and order, and decorum. Dionysus, the God of wine, stood for passion and intoxication, irrationality, and the breaking of boundaries. These two forces or drives -Apollonian and the Dionysian gave birth to friction and the unique tragic experience in the 5<sup>th</sup> century Greece in the Attic plays. “The Apollonian”, Nietzsche says, “represents reason, artistic order, clarity, and form in contrast to the Dionysian that stands for all that is passionate, irrational, and primal experientially and which is expressed mainly through ritual and music”. In Nietzsche’s conception of art, all that was balanced, regular, and harmonic belonged to Apollonian aesthetics. The hidden, violent, and darker aspects of pain and unknowability belonged to the Dionysian aesthetics. According to Nietzsche, the drives that Apollo represented were those of the “image maker or sculptor,” while Dionysius suggested the “imageless art of music” (Leitch, 2004). Thus, together they created the profound experience of Greek tragedy, which held the audience speechless and emotionally moved.

The tragic experience in Nietzschean reading was not a simple grieving over something found sad; it was rather a delving deeper into the recesses of the audience’s soul. The plays of Sophocles, for instance, combined the two impulses in Greek tragedy—the Apollonian and Dionysian to focus on the boundaries and limits of an individual in collision with the state. The plays thus move away from the orderliness of the Apollonian form to the Dionysian drive towards what he called, “the dissolution of boundaries, the destruction of individuality and excess.” (Nietzsche, 1990). Thus, the chorus, spectacle, songs, and lamentation all together create a danse macabre through Dionysian “orgiastic music, choral singing and dancing” (Nietzsche, 1990). Thus, tragedy rises from a certain Dionysian intoxication and becomes a “ritual of self-destruction,” giving insight into the human condition (Nietzsche, 1990; Ojimba, 2024).

Sophocles’ plays *Antigone* and *Ajax* both performed in 442 BCE. Play with the idea of exile, trauma, and transgression, ending in Nietzsche’s sense of Dionysian ritual of self-destruction. *Antigone* opens in the dark of early morning, when the eponymous protagonist goes out to sprinkle dust on the dead body of her

brother, Polyneices. She broke a taboo and proclaimed civic law established by Creon, the king of Athens. She opposes Creon's edict by trying to dignify the corpse of her brother and desperately trying to bury him to honor familial ties. Sophocles' *Ajax* also begins in the early morning hours when he, in the dark, lashes out against cattle, rams, and other animals, mistaking them for the Greek warriors who have denied him his rightful honor—the armor/mantle of Achilles. Later in the day, he realizes his folly and is filled with remorse for his delusion and stupidity. Both plays are situational as they become responses to immediate situations—the death of Polyneices and the denial of state burial for him, and the aftermath of the Trojan war that leads to the slaying of Ajax. The plays become philosophical discourses on an individual's sense of alienation, exile, and trauma. The only fitting expression to the profundity of grief in the tragic space of the plays is the musical expression of lamentation. The tragic hero in both plays laments their fate and becomes amorphous, a subject-in-process; no longer the knowable, stolid traditional hero Aristotle defines in his *Poetics*.

As both plays were performed in 442 BCE, they represented historical changes and transformations in Sophocles' age. They become responses to social ostracization and victimization in a world where old standards of heroism were being redefined in society. Athenian tragedy in Sophocles' times became more of a political theatre, which negotiated the rise of Democracy and the rights of citizens during wars and the post-war world. War in Sophoclean tragedy constitutes the main body of the narrative and is a source of trauma and psychological aftermath of violence. The plays, while they dramatize individual tragedies they do so in the context of national and local battles, anticipating the Peloponnesian war that was to devastate Athens, leaving her broken in spirit when Sophocles was an old man. In *Antigone*, the central conflict unfolds against the backdrop of the popular civil war between Argives and Polyneices against Eteocles and Creon. The mythic Trojan war is the immediate context of *Ajax* and impacts the eponymous protagonist's consciousness and sanity.

*Ajax* ends with the mental breakdown of the hero, and the narrative is a storytelling to map the trauma of the war and its repercussions. Ajax kills innocent animals, mistaking them for his adversaries and enemies under the delusion caused by the goddess Athena. *Antigone* ends with the suicide of the hero, read as her

martyrdom as she dies protesting against the king's unlawful edict that denies all citizens the right to bury Polyneices, who has been declared a traitor after the civil war. Before her death, she laments the king's order of her entombment in a cave, the denial of the right to bury her brother, inability to marry her fiancée, Haemon. Antigone's maternal, semiotic cry towards the end of the play undermines the patriarchal authority of Creon and his injustice. She laments:

*You see me, countrymen, on my last journey,  
Taking my last leave of the light of day;  
Going to my rest, where death shall take me  
Alive across the silent river.  
No wedding-day; no marriage music;  
Death will be all my bridal dower.*  
(Sophocles, p.148)

The images of “death”, “silent river” and “no wedding day” underline her state of being cut off from the Polis and community. The tragic hero in this case suffers not only because of his/her *hamartia* or tragic flaw but also because of banishment from the State. The Polis in the play is the enemy and adversary who banishes all who challenge the limits drawn by the law. The body of Antigone becomes the site where the battle between civic law and familial or sacred laws is fought. She can only boldly attempt to flout the rule of the king, but when caught by the Sentry, she says, “I did not think your edicts strong enough to overrule the unwritten unalterable laws of God and heaven, you being only a man.” (Sophocles, p.138).

Ajax, much like Antigone herself, suffers when his freedom is circumscribed by the state, which, along with the Greek goddess, Athena, and the warriors of the Trojan war, judge him for his defeatist attitude. The slighting caused by Odysseus, Menelaus, and Agamemnon, along with the unjust treatment meted out by Athena, makes him lament: “AIAI! Who would have thought the name I was given would sound out my misery? AIAS! AJAX! AGONY! AJAX means agony, so much agony” (Sophocles, p. 22). His mental breakdown, caused by the denial of the armor/mantle of Achilles after the war, is more of a subjectivized and interiorized

conflict. The play focuses on the irrationality and anarchic impulses of the hero, which defy easy categorization.

*Antigone* and *Ajax* are plays in response to the collective trauma caused by the war and a profound sense of alienation and dislocation in a world suddenly bereft of meaning. In *Ajax*, the central theme is the hero's neurosis and his hallucinations following the trauma of the battlefield and the denial of his rightful share. His suffering and "foolishness" lead him to slaughter animals, mistaking them for Greek heroes, Odysseus, Menelaus, and Agamemnon. The story that Sophocles tells through this bitter narrative is about larger questions about man's sense of futility and helplessness in a world devoid of camaraderie and succor to the soul. When he screams and laments in front of Tecmessa, he is underlining larger metaphysical questions:

*Oh!*  
*Darkness is now my only light;*  
*The gloom of the Underworld*  
*Shines for me. Take me!*  
*I have lost the right to look for*  
*Any help from gods or men.*  
*The daughter of Zeus,*  
*The mighty goddess,*  
*Torments me to my death.*  
*Where could I run?*  
*Where could I ever stay?*  
*My reputation now lies here.*  
*Among these butchered carcasses—*  
*My reward for the obsession of a fool.*  
 (Sophocles, p.21)

Both Ajax and Antigone reach a dead end and commit suicide. Their prose utterances and retaliatory speeches in the beginning, addressing their adversaries, break down as the play progresses. Before their suicides, they start lamenting in poetic language, calling upon countrymen, addressing the chorus, and the Polis, expressing fervent desire to live and yet the inability to continue. Thus, their deaths are not isolated events but form a continuum

and reflect on the shifting political and social climate of Athens, wherein the voice of citizens was becoming more powerful than the state's tyranny.

While Sophocles' life began years after the last tyrant ruled in Athens and Athenian democracy came to full flower (Meineck, 2007; Tripoula, 2024), he was, however, conscious of the devastation wars wrought to the mind and body. The plays trace the breakdown of language caused by trauma, wherein prose gives way to the poetic, a movement away from the symbolic structure of language, according to Julia Kristeva, to the semiotic. The incantations, lamentations, and cries of the two protagonists in Sophocles' plays are protests against the dark underbelly of royalist arrogance. The use of onomatopoeic Greek words in their lament in Dionysian vein is linked to Nietzschean "orgiastic ecstasy, passion and darkness". The gendering of the protagonists makes them feminized in terms of vulnerability and the threat they pose to the law of patriarchy. Creon's indictment of Antigone's actions, for instance, underlines his condemnation of her as a woman/citizen/daughter of Oedipus,

*She has already shown her arrogance  
and flouted established law  
And now this second challenge—to do it again  
And laughing, boast of her deed.  
She will be the man, not I,  
If she can go victorious and unpunished  
(Sophocles, p.155)*

Sophocles was born in 496 BCE. At a time when Athens was becoming a free democracy and experimenting with the new machinery of "popular" government (Watling, 1947). *Antigone*, in fact, represents the paranoia and fears of the populace faced with this emerging face of "democracy". This is the tyranny Antigone laments, addresses, and critiques. Edith Hall, however, in "The Sociology of Athenian Tragedy" refers to the Athenian democracy as "a xenophobic, patriarchal, and imperialist community, economically dependent on slavery and imperial tribute". (Hall, p.93). Sophocles' tragedies continue to question the democratic structures

that stood on shaky grounds, as they were based on the sovereignty of the ruler and the system of kingship that still followed its own edicts, disregarding public opinion. Tragedy in Sophocles' hands became a celebration of Dionysian passions, expressing contradictions between the rights of the state and the rights of the individual. *Antigone* and *Ajax* expose the cracks in the outward façade of democracy to reiterate the loss of sovereignty of the individual. The plays underline the cracks in the structure of Athenian democracy and bourgeois complacency.

Sophocles had direct encounters with the Athenian state while in service in the military as General (Strategos) twice and was appointed as the imperial treasurer of Athens. Thus, he was not apolitical but deeply involved in political and military affairs, negotiations with Athenian allies. His tragedies mirrored the impersonal state and its increasing atrocities on people, measured by the punishments meted out to both the tragic heroes. Both heroes in the plays are dislocated from their everyday life and made a butt of ridicule and contempt. The Chorus and its songs lend a certain sense of reassurance to the audience in the two plays. The elders' and citizens' comments on the main action open the tragedies to further spiritual, political, social, and psychological dimensions. "The Song of Man" of the Chorus in *Antigone* lists the wonderful powers of man in the face of atrocities and natural calamities. The choric commentary also highlights the ultimate powerlessness of man when faced by the state, which punishes any act of disobedience by death. Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Ajax* suggest how the imperial state at that time was built on consensus and complicity, using both ideological control and coercive state power.

In fact, the plays focus on *Antigone's* and *Ajax's* trauma and sense of exile from the polis as citizens and representatives of the citizen collective. The tragedies expose the deep fissure between the claims of the state and the lone individual raising a voice against its barbarity and cruelty. Their rebellion is not a freak incident but becomes an informed opposition to Greek Gods and popular heroes. The state is not seen here as a benevolent institution but rather as flawed and illegitimate. Creon and Odysseus, in *Antigone* and *Ajax* respectively, represent the impersonal state that judges all those who rebel against it. While Creon stubbornly denies burial to Polyneices, Odysseus, after *Ajax's* tragic suicide, wants his body

to be buried, revealing a certain compassion that the state might be capable of when faced with a dead end.

Philip Holt in "Polis, Tragedy, Antigone" suggests how the Polis or city-state in the Sophoclean age was not a "sprawling modern nation-state" but a more cohesive community (Holt, 1991). In his view, the citizens in Athens lived in a democracy where they were far less likely than "citizens today to feel neglected by, or alienated from the ruling power" (Holt, p.661). Therefore, the idea of Romantic Individual revolting against the state was considered an "anomaly, not a norm" (Holt, p.662). However, the plays *Antigone* and *Ajax* are about romantic individuals rebelling against impersonal laws and a mindless state that affects the entire community and has tragic repercussions to engulf families. The plays underline the imperial state that used consensus and complicity, ideological control, and coercive state power to punish individuals whom they perceived as "deviant". The state is represented by King Creon and Odysseus in league with goddess Athena in *Antigone* and *Ajax*, respectively. The rebellion of both Antigone and Ajax is an informed opposition to Greek gods, popular heroes, and the king, even as the state is seen as flawed and illegitimate, not a benevolent institution, the chorus in both plays suggests.

Sophocles witnessed the aggression of the Persian empire during the Persian wars from 490-479 BCE, and he cheered the victory of the winning Greek army at Salamis after the battle of Salamis. The conflict between the Greek city-states and the Persian empire taught him the dangers of imperial rule and the aggression of empires. Though the Persian wars unified the Greek city-states against the common enemy, creating a pan-Hellenic identity which began the Golden Age in Athens but the trauma and wounds caused by protracted battles took a very long time to heal. The two plays consolidate Sophocles' responses to war as they anticipate the Peloponnesian Wars that occurred in 431 BCE and explore the ways the democratic city of Athens was punishing those who asked questions of the state (Castoriadis, 2007: 11, 123; Theodosiadis, 2025: 116-7, Vavouras, 2017). Sophocles' tragedies use war as the main plank to speak on issues of betrayal, anarchy, and limits of freedom, and in the case of *Ajax*, on madness as opposed to civilization.

In *Antigone*, the conflict is between civic duty, familial obligation and conscience gets voiced in Antigone's challenging the

king's unjust law that forbids a decent burial to her brother Polyneices. Creon's stubbornness becomes more evident when he doesn't allow the body of the "traitor" to be buried even beyond the limits of the city but rather be food for birds of prey. Ajax shows the ludicrous nature of heroism, the hero's foolhardy impulse to show strength against his "enemies" who turn out to be brute animals he slaughters in a fit of anger. Ajax is defeated by goddess Athena and Odysseus together in a modern play which depicts the tragic hero turning upon himself only to become a butt of ridicule for others. However, Barker Elton in "Dissent Hero" points to the play being radical and suggestive of an institutional place for dissent. In fact, Ajax's act of suicide "enshrines his dissent eternally in silence" (Elton, p.19). Elton points out how Odysseus meets Ajax after death in the underworld but the latter's silence is a "silent resistance". The tragic suicide of Ajax like Antigone leads to the break-up of families and petty demagogues (Elton, 2004).

Both the tragedies use interior monologues to follow the heroes' subjectivity. Though the tragic hero is higher than average run of humans, in *Antigone* the tragic hero is the former king Oedipus' daughter, while *Ajax* is a proclaimed warrior. In both plays, the fall of the tragic hero leads to debasement of the social order and perversion of laws. In *Ajax*, despite the hero's tall stature, he falls into delusion caused by Athena's hallucinatory web that makes his mind believe that the animals he was slaughtering are indeed his opponents,

*He attacked the horned beasts, smashing their spines, then hacking out a circle of carcasses. He thought he had hold of the two sons of Atreus and was slaughtering them with his own hands. Then he hacked at his chief and that chief, hurling himself on and on, deeper into madness. And I was there to urge him into the trap. Once he tired of the slaughter, he tied up the surviving sheep and cows and dragged them back to his camp. As if he had captured men, not horned beasts. Now he is torturing them, tied up inside his tent.*

(Sophocles, p.6)

Sophocles' plays *Antigone* and *Ajax* narrate the dislocation of the subject/tragic hero when faced by an impersonal and cold state

that refuses them the freedom of choice. The state is represented by Creon and Odysseus, both of whom mock the tragic heroes. They become two faces of imperial authority that could be repressive or benevolent according to their whims. Creon obstinately keeps denying Antigone's brother a burial, while issuing orders to bury her alive. Similarly, Odysseus taunts Ajax but shows "kindness" by permitting his dead body to be buried. They both represent the arbitrariness of power and those in authority. While Ajax also has a hostile world of Gods and Greek heroes who affect the life of a warrior and wreck his mind to mistakenly believe a flock of sheep and animals to be Achaean elders—Odysseus, Menelaus, and Agamemnon. When the hero, after killing the animals, realizes his foolishness, he wants to take his life rather than live in shame.

In both plays, the state becomes increasingly impersonal and coldly distant. In *Antigone*, the state embodied by Creon and his advisors, even the Sentry who catches Antigone covering her brother's dead body with a bit of dust. He represents the paraphernalia of governance and arbitrary rules, which have no place for personal relationships and familial ties. The King's decree forbidding the burial of Polyneices becomes a political act which asserts the authority of the state over the individual, thereby flouting the democratic basis of community living and freedom. He screams, "The city is the King's—that's the law!". Antigone challenges this impersonal state which does not accommodate personal royalties or religious customs. The tragic conflict is also a collision between moral obligation and repressive state apparatus. In the state of civic war personal freedom stands suspended, but Antigone's tragic lament becomes a protest against the king's diktat. The battle becomes one between human conscience, sacred duty and the civic decree which finally leads to the destruction of Antigone, Haemon and Eurydice, his mother.

In *Ajax*, the impersonal state is represented by the Greek military command, which includes Odysseus, Agamemnon, and Menelaus. While the King orders Antigone's burial even when she is alive, Ajax is judged by his seemingly "dishonorable" actions, which include his attempt to kill the Greek warriors who have been unfair to him after the Trojan war, and is denied a burial after he commits suicide, till ironically, Odysseus intervenes. Thus, military law and political necessity, not emotion or heroic merit, determine the choices of the leaders in both plays. Teucer pleads for the burial

of Ajax, and Odysseus' change of heart marks a change from the situation in *Antigone*. The impersonal state in *Ajax* seems to have some place for mercy and reflection, but it drives the hero to take his own life.

Sophocles' tragedies highlight trauma and exile caused by the devastating psychological and social effects of war, loss, and displacement. Trauma means a "wound" in Greek, thereby referring to both physical injury and deep emotional sorrow. In *Ajax*, trauma is expressed in the rage of the hero, his isolation from humanity, a sense of exile from the community and the Polis, hallucination, and finally a bitter suicide. The play dramatizes the hero's moral and spiritual injury, his shame, moral conflict, and sense of violation of his values. In *Antigone*, the tragic hero's suffering is caused by being alienated from her family, from the Polis, and her own body, which is controlled by the state. Exile in Greek tragedy meant severe punishment that resulted in loss of home, the city, religious life, and place in social order and hierarchy. Those in a state of exile were stripped of all markers of identity and belonging, shamed and isolated, carrying the stigma of pollution. King Oedipus in Sophocles' tragedy, after discovering the truth of his birth and his "sin" of pollution, blinds himself and chooses to beg for exile to protect the city. In both *Antigone* and *Ajax*, the protagonists are cut off from their homeland, from their family, and lose their right to remain members of civil society. Exile in a deeper sense also meant, therefore, to be cut off from oneself, to be an alien to everyone, when the only alternative left is to lament one's "cursed" state.

Both *Antigone's* and *Ajax's* lamentations in Sophocles' Attic tragedies are forms of storytelling that move through a crisp narrative from hubris to peripeteia, anagnorisis, denouement, and catharsis. The lamentation is both a tragedy and a poetic form which is as dark as Job's cries in the *Book of Job* in the Old Testament in the *Bible*. The lamentations with their subversive potential bring into question the neat, schematic structure of tragedy as formulated by Aristotle in the *Poetics*. In ancient Greece, lamentation was part of funerary rituals that were often suppressed or regulated by the state because of its emotional and potentially subversive power. Lamentation within the space of a tragedy becomes a cultural ritual, giving voice to the voiceless, thereby challenging the social order.

Lamentation in *Antigone* and *Ajax* mark pockets of poetry and breakdown of prose. The lamentation becomes a dangerous parallel to the Chorus's songs and commentary, which is regulated, wise, and contained. Antigone's and Ajax's lamentations become an elaborate protest against a sense of dislocation and exile in a state that is unjust to its citizens. Sophocles' plays have sustained lamentations which have their own tragic dignity and grandeur. According to Peter Meineck,

There is lament in a third of Oedipus,...Electra laments for her father and for her brother she thinks is dead. Deianeira grieves over her life as wife of an absent hero, later she grieves over what she has unwittingly done, and Heracles grieves over his own slow death. Philoctetes laments his wound, and Ajax bemoans his shaming by the Greeks. (Meineck, p.viii).

Lamentation in both tragedies becomes a means to negotiate war, trauma, and the aftershocks of war. These lamentations are a formal expression of mourning and are performed as songs or chants by the protagonists. These are choral and ritualistic in nature, embedded in the structure of tragedy, and are in the form of choral odes and kommos or exchange of lament between the Chorus and the protagonist. The language in these lamentations is stylized and poetic, becoming a form of resistance or defiance that challenges the authority of the king and the state. Lamentation, called "threnos" in Greek, becomes a powerful tool to express grief for the dead and explore ethical and social themes. Lamentation becomes a ritualistic expression performed by women and occasionally by men. According to Naomi Weiss, the paradoxical nature of lament in Greek tragedy makes it both musical and amousia or "a noisy disturbance that seems to be the antithesis of a lyrical performance." (Weiss, p. 244). In *Antigone* and *Ajax*, the lament moves from musical rhythms to jarring oscillation of poetry and prose to defy the state and express a sense of inner sorrow. The lamentation in the plays does not just mourn the dead and those about to die but reflects on the tragic events of their lives and enables them to unsettle the often "polite" and structured nature of the dialogues. The laments tell stories of their lives and comment on social conventions, forming part of the tragedy that goes beyond the limits of grief and hamartia as described by Aristotle in the

*Poetics.* The lament in these plays with their own rhythms, melodies, and gestures, ritualistic form becomes a way of negotiating their own social ostracization and alienation. In Ruth Fainlight's translation of *Antigone*, the lament becomes a cry for justice and a song of defiance against those in power,

*O city! city!--*  
*You, propertied men of the city!*  
*But the foundations of Dirce,*  
*And holy groves of Thebes with its many chariots,*  
*You at least can testify how one laments me,*  
*And by what aberration of justice*  
*I go to the heaped stones of my prison and unnatural tomb.*  
*What a wretched creature I am*  
*With nowhere to dwell, neither*  
*Among morals or corpses,*  
*Not the living nor the dead.*  
 (Sophocles, p. 170)

Tragedy, in Aristotelian definition, has six characteristics: plot, character, thought, diction, song, and spectacle. The songs in tragedies provide narrative commentary, lend a sense of cadence and rhythm, and provide emotional support. The lamentations do something similar, but they can also be at cross purposes with the songs of the chorus; they might mock at their traditional wisdom and philosophical discourses. Choric commentary and songs are the main body of the play, lamentations are more like marginalia, they are like spurts from the abundance of grief that cannot be expressed in regular language. Lamentations are not just interior monologues and expressions of inward suffering but become a pungent critique of the hierarchized and powerful Polis. When Ajax laments that he is giving form to things that cannot be spoken, his sense of shame and indignity. He expressed himself as an outsider, a mortal competing with Gods and warriors,

*Now I am ridiculed by the men who escaped me.*  
*This was not my plan, but when a god strikes,*  
*Even the coward can outdo the better man.*  
*And what now? The gods revile me.*  
*That is certain. I am despised by the Greeks.*

(Sophocles, p. 23)

In *Antigone*, lamentation gives form to the unsaid in the play. She opposes Creon's authority and mocks his rule. She laments, "Mockery, mockery! By the gods of our fathers, must you make me a laughing-stock while I yet live? O Lordly songs of my city! O Thebes!" (Sophocles, p.149). Her words resonate at a visceral level as the voice of those on the margins in terms of gender and power in Greek society.

Julia Kristeva traces the interplay of the "Symbolic" and "Semiotic" in Greek tragedies, which transforms language and meaning. The Semiotic drive is from the maternal linked to the body, and its primal drives are located in the chaotic and pre-symbolic space. The Semiotic is also linked to fluidity and subject-in-process or a becoming state. The symbolic is linked to the law of the father, to patriarchal and masculine aspects as represented and structured through language. Greek tragedy, in Kristeva's terms, sees an oscillation between the semiotic and the symbolic within the individual and socio-cultural structures. The semiotics in Greek tragedy manifests as lamentation, which encodes the hero's visceral reactions, struggle with fate, and unsettling moments of abjection where boundaries of the self are disrupted. The symbolic in tragedy manifests as social hierarchies, law, institutions, Greek Gods, along with the structured and culturally defined aspects of language. The symbolic is also in the realm of consolidated forms, which are expressed in socially defined roles and characters.

Both *Antigone* and *Ajax* move away from the symbolic order represented by Creon/Odysseus the patriarchs who mete out punishment to the tragic hero. After their displacement from the Polis, they express themselves in the semiotic lamentation wherein they narrativize their trauma in lyrical, subjective, interior monologues. The tragic hero's lamentations become adjunct to the choric commentary which goes beyond the rigidity of linguistic structures and limits of the genre. Translation of these laments from Greek to English often captures the pre-verbal, monosyllabic, guttural sounds of their poetic prose, moving beyond the confines of language, breaking down and being liberated. *Antigone's* tearful bemoaning and lament cause the audience to awaken to suffering of the woman as the tragic hero. Her exile from the polis in fact is

caused by her vulnerability as a woman and sister of a traitor. Her lament reveals her ancestry with all other women who suffered likewise due to masculine cruelty,

*The daughter of Tantalus, a Phrygian maid,  
Was doomed to a piteous death on the rock  
Of Sipylus, which embraced and imprisoned her,  
Merciless as the ivy; rain and snow  
Beat down upon her, mingled with tears  
(Sophocles, p.148)*

While Ajax in his self-reflexive speech agonizes over his predicament, in fact his foolishness,

*What a pitiable man I am  
To have let those devils slip  
From my grasp and instead  
Attacks horned cattle, sheep and goats,  
Shedding their dark blood.  
(Sophocles, p. 20)*

Lament in these tragedies opens the plays beyond the confines and limits of traditional tragedy and Aristotelean definition of tragic hero. Lament here expresses grief and loss, deep emotional and psychological consequences of suffering becoming a bridge between the personal and political and the human and the divine realms. As formal expression of mourning, lamentation is performed in as songs and chants by both protagonists to reveal the philosophical dimensions of their suffering which is not personal grief alone but a reflection on the polis and voicing of their trauma. Accompanied by singing, stylized gestures and music combined with speech, lamentations in *Antigone* and *Ajax* becomes “performed” grief. Mourning in the lamentation becomes a form of transgression which challenges the limits of the genre. Antigone mourns the death of Polyneices even when he is branded a traitor and speaks out against Creon’s cruel edict which prohibits burial to traitors. Her lament is both personal and political as she comments on the moral decay of the state and impending doom,

*And must go the way that lies before me.  
No funeral hymn; no marriage-music;  
No sun from this day forth, no light,  
No friend to weep at my departing.*  
(Sophocles, p. 149)

Through the lamentation, both tragedies reveal the shaky grounds on which the “democratic” structures stood. The tragedies question the sovereignty of the symbolic —of Greek gods/King/demi-Gods/warriors by allowing the hero to flout edicts that circumscribe freedom. Democracy is seen as unjust to citizens and prejudiced based on gender, ethnicity, and class hierarchy. Antigone and Ajax despite their heroism and class superiority find themselves on the borderlines of social hierarchy, exiled because they dared to mock at social rules and obligations that are undemocratic. Through their painful cries, Sophocles writes about the dark underbelly of trauma and suffering behind the royalist and bourgeois complacency. When Antigone questions, “What law of have I transgressed? What god can save me now? What help or hope have I, in whom devotion is deemed sacrilege?” (Sophocles, p.150), she reveals the cracks in the world where laws are unfair to those who are powerless and even gods seem to abandon those who break away from the symbolic.

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