

Problematizing Kinship and Spatial Division: A Reading of Sophocles's *The Theban Plays*

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Abstract

Kinship involves relationships that are primarily based on consanguinity and biological affinity. Family is an important site for an individual's exposure to the domestic as well as to the public space. It symbolizes the normative system where sexual regulation, spatial division for men and women, and biological orientation are naturalized in the socio-cultural context. In the kinship network one can trace kin belonging to both the 'order of nature' as opposed to the 'order of law'. The covert distinction between 'nature' and 'culture' corresponds to the level of gendered configuration of spaces, for example, '*oikos*' (private sphere) and '*polis*' (public sphere) in the Greek socio-political and cultural context. Taking Sophocles's *The Theban Plays* as the case study, this proposed paper aims to explore the assumptive binaries in the normative kinship system vis-à-vis the hierarchical configuration of spaces. The paper would also examine how women pose a challenge to the discursive 'constructs' and problematize the spatial bifurcation by transcending the gender specific roles.

Keywords: kinship, public sphere, regulation, private sphere, normative, nature, culture, problematize.

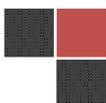
Nor need this mother-marrying frighten you;
 Many a man has dreamt as much. Such things
 Must be forgotten, if life is to be endured (*OR* 1011-13).

The quoted lines, uttered by Jocasta in *Oedipus Rex* to allay Oedipus's unconscious fear regarding an incestuous relationship, pose a challenge to the normative assumptions about family, marriage and kinship in the Greek socio-cultural context. Jocasta's words are evocative of the negotiation of the ensuing tension between familial obligation at the personal level and allegiance to norms appropriated by the state at the politico-cultural level. The hegemonic power structure operates both at the familial and societal levels and this power structure is based on hierarchy where one category is prioritized over the other. In case of kinship, it is relationships among individuals that are defined and naturalized by the normative assumptions. Kinship, a key area in Anthropology, involves relationships that are primarily based on consanguinity and affinity. Kin basically refers to a blood kin as opposed to any fictive or adoptive kin. 'Blood' is an important biological referent which precisely refers to genetics and 'nature' as opposed to 'culture'.¹ The Ego-Centric² approach to kinship underscores the hierarchy between 'nature' and 'culture' where 'nature' is prioritized over 'culture'. The other forms of relationships at the socio-cultural level are considered as the metaphoric extension of biological ties.

Kinship as a normative system defines the relationships among people and situates them in the socio-cultural hierarchy within an ethnic community. The normative system is informed by the cultural system that takes into consideration the abstract implications of myths, beliefs, value system and cultural practices. The cultural constructs mould an individual's identity and initiate his or her entry into the larger normative structure i.e. the patriarchal society where sexual regulation and spatial division for men and women are naturalized. Family, an important cultural construct within the societal fabric, sustains the normative system. Family is an important site for an individual's exposure to the domestic as well as to the public space. In *Critical Kinship Studies* (2016) Damien W. Riggs et al. opine that "families serve as a nodal point through which individuals are 'attached' to disciplinary structures on the basis of a range of moral and legal codes surrounding families that mandate for parents to enforce actively social norms and ensure adherence to modes of self-discipline" (29).

Kinship is based on gender specific symbolic behavioural traits. It actually reinforces the dichotomy between 'nature' and 'culture', the parameter set and naturalized through normative heterosexual assumptions to distinguish between man and woman. Here 'nature' symbolizes biology and unregulated sexuality which are associated with the woman, whereas 'culture' symbolizes norm, order that 'contain' sexuality and structures biology and hence associated with the man. This exclusive demarcation not only situates men and women into the socially sanctioned hierarchy but also conversely traces the sexual orientation of gender i.e. the construction of gendered identity. Janet Carsten in *After Kinship* (2004) writes: "Bodily transformations entail social obligations, and vice versa. Indeed, it is not very clear just where the boundaries between biological and social attributes would lie" (81).

Women characters in Greek tragedies often violate Aristotle's assumptions regarding their normative behaviour. Aristotle attributes women with essential virtue to maintain *sophrosune* (self-control, chastity), to keep their household in order and to satisfy their men. In *Poetics* Aristotle writes: "First and foremost, goodness. ... Secondly,

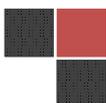


appropriateness: it is possible for the character to be courageous, but for this to be an inappropriate way for a woman to display courage or cleverness” (24). Any kind of nonreligious public activity performed by a woman is considered as the violation of silence, invisibility and moral dependence which are appropriate to a virtuous wife. This discursive formation of gendered identity corresponds to the sexual division of labour and the bifurcation of space as ‘public’ and ‘private’.

The Greek society is marked by its politico-cultural spatialization: ‘*oikos*’³ and ‘*polis*’⁴. This ‘radical privatization’ and ‘cultural isolation’ create an imbalance between the values and interest of domestic and public spheres (Foley 9). This ideological and normative construction of space reinforces the subordination of women in socio-political hierarchy. The spatial bifurcation unfolds dominant-subjugated tension at the intersection of these spaces as women try to re-possess the space traditionally reserved for men by redefining the spatial demarcation as fluid and their identification with these spaces as flexible. This deviation on part of women problematizes the notion of space and questions its appropriation by the authority. By inverting the gendered appropriation of spaces and spatial appropriation of gender, women open up possibility for reconfiguration of spaces by advocating the personal as the political. In Greek tragedies, actions of protagonists, conflicts and dynamics of power in the ‘*polis*’ occupy the focal point in the narrative but the texts often explore these issues through the infringement of spaces and important agency assumed by women in spite of their cultural position as the ‘other’. Despite the socio-political distinction between ‘*oikos*’ and ‘*polis*’, women in many Greek tragedies actively participate in political affairs, make public choices that challenge the gendered division of activities which corresponds to the spatial bifurcation.

The gendered conceptualization of space especially its symbolic socio-cultural attributes focuses on the hierarchical power structure and the dynamics of relationships. In spite of the valorization of genetic relatedness and biological affinity in conceptualizing kinship, these factors are ‘selected’ and ‘altered’ at the socio-cultural level as Schneider writes in *American Kinship* (1968): “This selection, alteration, and addition all come about through the application of human reason to the state of nature” (36). So, kinship formations subtly foreground the dichotomies between nature and culture which corresponds to the distinction between sex and gender, male and female, domestic and public in the Greek socio-cultural context. But this definitive nature of kinship is no longer viable since an individual simultaneously belongs to the ‘family of orientation’ and ‘family of procreation’⁵. People’s oscillation between allegiance to kith and loyalty to kin, cognatic love and conjugal love⁶ within kinship network problematizes kinship and opens up possibility to reconfigure kinship by drawing attention to the interlocked category of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’.

To bring out my point I will focus on Sophocles’s *The Theban Plays* which comprise three plays *King Oedipus*, *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*. These plays are derived from a cycle of legend related to the royal house of Thebes. The date of composition of the plays does not follow any sequential order as it is there in the legend of Oedipus. Their probable dates are – *Antigone* (442 – 441 B.C.), *King Oedipus* (429 – 420), *Oedipus at Colonus* (401, after Sophocles died). Taking Sophocles’s *The Theban Plays* as the case study, this proposed paper aims to explore the problematic nature of kinship vis-à-vis the arbitrary nature of spatial division. The paper would examine the politico-cultural implication of the discursive ‘constructs’ and how women pose a challenge to the spatial



bifurcation through their active participation in the public sphere. The paper will also focus on the unresolved tension between various enmeshed binaries. Finally, what functions this deviation from normative kinship system can undertake, would be the point upon which this paper would draw its conclusion, commenting largely on the importance of a thoroughfare between cultural spaces to question stereotypes and ensuring collective participation for the holistic development of society.

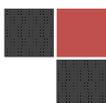
In *Oedipus Rex* Jocasta proves herself as the ideal companion of Oedipus. Whereas men neglect their public duties by engaging themselves into unnecessary quarrel which disturbs the political stability, Jocasta proves herself instrumental in mediating the quarrel between two 'warring brothers', Oedipus and Creon. She reprimands both of them and makes them aware of their duties in the midst of the adverse situation of Thebes:

What is the meaning of this loud argument,
 You quarrelsome men? I wonder you are not ashamed,
 In this time of distress, to air your private troubles.
 Come in, my husband; and Creon, you go home.
 You are making much of some unimportant grievance. (OR 634 – 638)

Both Creon and Oedipus present their case before her in order to justify themselves implicitly acknowledging the authority that her responsibility entails. Her language echoes her sense of civic responsibility. Her oscillation between relationships pertaining to the 'order of nature' and the 'order of law' suggests her refusal to privilege one category over the other. Schneider pinpoints the hierarchization of relationships in *American Kinship* (1968): "Relatives by blood are related in an entirely *objective way*; husband and wife are linked *subjectively*. ... It [blood ties] is part of the natural order and therefore follows the laws of nature and not the laws of man" (37); (original emphasis).

As an active agent, Jocasta inverts the fictive hierarchy in kinship system where the 'biological model' is valorized over the 'social relationship'. What is most noticeable is that Oedipus who becomes furious in the presence of Creon and Teiresias, becomes calm in Jocasta's presence. This suggests the power of love she commands over her husband. Schneider writes: "As a kind of relationship love can be translated as *enduring, diffuse solidarity*. *Solidarity* because the relationship is supportive, helpful and cooperative; ..." (52); (original emphasis). Instead of being biased, she shows her '*enduring, diffuse solidarity*' with both her husband and brother and thus problematizes the definitive nature of kinship. This active participation into the public and political domain by Jocasta inverts the normative power structure that restrains women within '*oikos*'. Sylvia Junko Yanagisako et al. in their essay entitled, "Toward a Unified Analysis of Gender and Kinship" write that "the domestic/public opposition is more in line with a structural-functionalist perspective of the sort that has prevailed in the field of kinship studies" and it is "necessary to explain the general identification of women with domestic life and men with public life and the consequent universal cross-cultural asymmetry in the evaluation of sexes" (18).

Jocasta's role is not limited to a mediator, rather she also tries her best to find out the reason behind her husband's grievance: "Tell me, I implore you, / Why you have conceived this terrible hatred against him" (OR 699-700). She is totally unaware of King Laius's murder by her own son. She unwittingly marries her own son and gives birth to four children. Kinship relation in its exclusive sense is arbitrary since it naturalizes blood

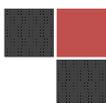


relatives, sexual regulation of women and heteronormativity that endorses the principle of “the unification of opposites” (Schneider 39). The murder of one’s blood relative and the incestuous relationship are considered as heinous crime from Greek politico-cultural perspective. It marks a deviation from the behavioural traits as defined by the normative system. There is no demarcation between ‘mother’ and ‘wife’, ‘son’ and ‘husband’, ‘son’ and ‘brother’, ‘daughter’ and ‘sister’. Both the lineal and collateral kin merge together and makes the kinship relations problematic.

The dissolution of distinctive categories renders the normative system ineffective and problematizes the arbitrary categorization of kin in terms of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ binary. The subtle hints in Jocasta’s speeches prove to be more convincing and effective than Teiresias’s mere rhetoric to accentuate Oedipus’s doubt. His unconscious fear regarding patricide and incest is evocative of the regulation of sexuality in the Greek society that privileges heteronormativity exclusively over other forms of relationships. Robert Deliege in *Anthropology of the Family and Kinship* (2011) writes: “The principle of nuclear family and the incest taboo dictates that each person has a precise and particular relationship on the one hand and, on the other hand, that he must extend his relationships beyond this limited circle. The phenomenon of expansion gives rise to an increasingly complex network of relationships” (12).

Since incest is a taboo, people engaged in such relationship are abominable. Normative relation in a family has its symbolic manifestation in sexual intercourse, whereas, “Incest, which is the gravest wrong, consists in unifying what is one to begin with by the device of unifying opposites, and of failing to separate what was one into two, thereby directly inverting in one stroke both sides of the formula, that only different things can be united by sexual intercourse and only united things made different” (Schneider 40). Jocasta performs the vital role of mitigating the inner tension of Oedipus by her soothing words which are couched in conjugal love and motherly affection. Like the dichotomy between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, the binary between ‘conjugal love’ and ‘cognatic love’ is also left unresolved. It underscores the flexibility of such categories that necessitates the reconfiguration of kinship relations and re-conceptualization of spatial dialectics.

Feminist critic Helene P. Foley in her book, *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy* (2001) has distinguished between two kinds of tragic women – ‘sacrificial’ and ‘vindictive’ (11). The first type suggests submissive women who conform to the arbitrary spatial division. The second type of women assume important agency so far as their infringement and engagement in the public sphere is concerned. They posit a serious threat to politico-cultural spatialization. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Ismene and Antigone perform very important function. The riddle of the sphinx which is solved by Oedipus himself, is ironically played out in his own life. Both Ismene and Antigone are the only shelter, a third leg for an old, helpless Oedipus. Whereas he is deserted by his own sons, it is his daughters who take initiatives to treat him with almost motherly affection. They show ‘enduring, diffuse solidarity’ with their infirm father whereas Eteocles and Polynices show ingratitude. This zest on part of the daughters is important since it deconstructs the normative gendered traits in kinship relations and questions the viability of spatial demarcation. The use of such phrases as ‘lead you’, ‘lean on’ suggests that Oedipus is totally dependent on them. Antigone’s tone of pleading touches the heart of the chorus and it is her superb capacity that she makes them feel pity for Oedipus in spite of his heinous



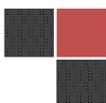
crime: “Though you refuse to hear my poor blind father, ... / Yet have some pity for me, I beseech you! / Only for my father’s sake I am pleading” (OC 237-41).

Oedipus unconsciously conforms to normative gender specific roles and the naturalization of spatial division. He forbids his daughters to look upon the secret site of his own grave since it will defend Athens against the attack of Thebes: “You must not ask to see forbidden mysteries” (OC 1628). This hierarchical conceptualization of men and women at the socio-cultural level is questioned by positive agency assumed by women. Whereas male members show their negligence towards their kin, female members serve as a shelter. Antigone has not only shown her compassion and self-abnegating devotion to her father but also to her brother, Polynices. Her concern for Polynices’s misery suggests that in spite of sibling rivalry and tension, love and empathetic attachment bind people beyond blood ties. It is their sense of ‘philia’⁷ that motivates Antigone and Ismene to return to Thebes to bridge the gap between the querulous brothers. Their assumption of political responsibility stems not only from their familial concerns but also from a desire to re-possess the space where women are strategically rendered powerless. They relegate their differences to forge relations in wider kinship network that does not merely categorize people in terms of ‘consanguine’ and ‘affine’.

In *Antigone* we find that familial responsibility and religious duty are more important for Antigone than political expediency. At the intersection of two domains she oscillates between personal obligation to one’s kin and political allegiance to norms appropriated by the state, kin belonging to the ‘order of nature’ as opposed to kin belonging to the ‘order of law’. Instead of privileging one over the other, she reconfigures the spatial dynamics by fudging the exclusivity of such discursive constructs and turning the personal into the political. Antigone sacrifices her marriage for the larger cause of serving the unwritten laws by burying her dead brother Polynices. It is piety, kinship and fraternal love that impel her to defy Creon’s edict. For her the universal law of nature is more viable than the anthropocentric law and it conversely underscores the dichotomies between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, ‘eternal’ and ‘temporal’, ‘domestic’ and ‘public’. She points at the unnatural and arbitrary dictate of Creon:

Creon has given funeral honours to one,
And not to the other; nothing but shame and ignominy.
.....
It is against you and me he has made this order. (23-31)

Both Creon and Antigone assume two distinctive ethical and political stances. In an article entitled “The women of Thebes” (1995), Barbara Goff writes: “If we accordingly compare the women of theatrical Thebes to those of its dramatic counterpart, two significant characteristics of Theban women emerge. They are repeatedly prevented from performing the ritual acts which were Greek women’s chief public duty and conversely, they are called upon to intervene in the political sphere when their male relatives abandon their gender specific responsibilities” (353). Antigone problematizes the notion of kinship by inverting the normative system and judging it from her own perspective while relegating the state sanctioned norms to the margin. The burial of the dead seems to her as the very touchstone of noble heritage and ‘philia’. The tension between these binaries continues and it indicates the impossibility of reaching to any definitive solution. Antigone successfully situates the tension within the familial space. So, family from where the

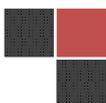


hegemonic power structure operates, becomes an important site for transformation by doing away with the normative and fictive assumptions.

Antigone's existence is spatialized and she is subjected to the constant surveillance of the state. It not only relegates her further to the margin but also makes her position vulnerable. It can be theorized through Foucauldian review of Bentham's 'Panopticon' (1995) where Foucault interprets the logic of relationship between gaze and power, surveillance and subordination. The observer situates the subject in a subservient position by rendering him or her as an object for surveillance (Foucault 202-209). By rejecting her 'subject' position Antigone posits a challenge to the arbitrary spatial division and repressive mechanism of the state. H.D.F. Kitto in *Greek Tragedy: A Literary Study* (2001) writes: "Face to face with Creon's legality she indeed answers legally, and nobly, inspired to her highest eloquence, but essentially she is doing much more than championing one code against another; she is giving her whole being for her brother's honour" (129). By challenging both the dominant ideology and repression, Antigone creates her own space beyond the discursive 'constructs'.

Unresolved Conflicts and tensions between binaries in multiple forms continue throughout the text and it suggests the impossibility of any monolithic interpretation of kinship and space in the politico-cultural context of the Greek society. While focusing on the normative categories, the texts simultaneously trace the subversive potential embedded within those categories. In spite of the fact that 'philia' is privileged over allegiance to state, within the site of family, one can trace dichotomies regarding obligation to one's kin, for example, if Antigone's tending to her brother Polynices despite the prohibition of Creon, overrates blood relations, Eteocles's killing of his brother Polynices underrates blood relations. "The conflict between Creon and Antigone is not only between city and house, but also between man and woman. Creon identifies his political authority and his sexual identity ... He sees Antigone then, as a challenge to his most important values and his self-image" (Segal 182).

The 'nature' / 'culture' binary emerges as an important theoretical axis especially for interpreting the overlapping concepts like 'gender' and 'kinship' but it conversely underscores the unresolved conflict between other enmeshed binaries, for example, public/private, sex/gender, conjugal/ cognatic etc. By dissolving the exclusive nature of such categories, the narrative problematizes the notion of such hierarchical, normative constructs. It opens up possibilities for re-conceptualizing and reconfiguring such categories. By deconstructing the regulative logic of state machinery and restructuring family as an important site for transformation the narrative questions the arbitrary privileging of one category over the other. It situates the tension in the wider socio-cultural network of kinship so that it can successfully foreground the tenuous border existing between the personal and the political. The thoroughfare between cultural spaces opens up possibilities for rendering the borders fluid and the identity formation more flexible that can ensure the collective participation across the politico-cultural boundaries to sustain the holistic development of society.



Notes:

¹In the kinship system, ‘nature’ signifies biology and the innateness of bond, whereas ‘culture’ refers to a system of symbols and their meanings. The cultural system is constituted of several units and the meaning entailed by these units collectively reshapes various social units that are rooted to culture.

²‘Ego’ in the kinship system means the referent person from where the closeness of blood-ties is reckoned and the Ego-centric approach distinguishes lineal kin from the collateral kin and ‘consanguine’ from ‘affine’ as well.

³The word ‘*oikos*’ in Greek means household or domestic sphere where women perform their daily chores and maintain the norms to keep the household in order.

⁴The word ‘*polis*’ in Greek refers to the larger socio-political space where men perform many important activities. The creation of this space circumscribes the role of women as it denies their entry into the important political affairs of the state.

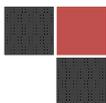
⁵‘Family of orientation’ refers to the family where an individual is born and the ‘family of precreation’ suggests the formation of family by marriage.

⁶‘Conjugal love’ refers to love between the married couple, whereas ‘cognatic love’ denotes siblings’ love.

⁷The word ‘*philia*’ in Greek underscores blood ties especially kinship which is privileged over other forms of relationship.

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