

# Dance as Resistance: Martha Graham's "Greek Autochoreographies"

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**Abstract:** Active on stage in the late nineteenth century, Martha Graham, one of the first feminists to become a pioneer for American modern dance, inspired many women to free the female body from its gender baggage and to pursue their own identities through the art of dance. It is quite evident in dance research that deserved recognition has been given to Graham's contribution to American modern dance, thus, mapping the influence of Modernism, Psychoanalysis and Anthropology on her works from the 1930s and early 1940s. But in this paper I am particularly interested in a performative analysis of how Graham's (what I have termed) 'Greek Autochoreographies' namely *Cave of the Heart* (1946); *Errand into the Maze* (1947); *Night Journey* (1947); and *Clytemnestra* (1958) can illustrate each of the above mentioned three elements of resistance within the social circumstances and theoretical framework each dance was choreographed in.

**Keywords :** autochoreography, gender, body, theatre, dance

"Dance can display the ethos of a culture and objectively re-read the subjective 'inner life'."

In the current postmodern world, the burgeoning use of the theatre as a tool of remonstrance, resistance and revolution has materialized quite naturally in our society. Theorists like Lo and Gilbert (2002) define the 'theatre of resistance' as being "...driven by a political imperative to interrogate the cultural hegemony that underlies different systems of governance, education, social and economic organization, and representation (35)." Typically the theatre of resistance projects is an amalgamation of music, dance, comedy and other performance modes found in the mainstream theatre productions. Taking into consideration this definition and approach of the theatre of resistance, I would like to term the 'American modern dance' as an operative mode of the theatre of resistance.

Dwelling deeply into the matter, one finds that there are three elements of the resistance theatre that interrogates the hegemonic values, produces resistance to oppression and build opportunities for empowerment possible. The theatre of resistance (1) **critiques mainstream discourses**, disrupts deeply ingrained notions, and brings the foundations and construction of norms and power into question (Foucault, 1984; Kristeva, 1986; Taylor, 2003); (2) **reconfigures mainstream notions of the speaking subject and gives voices to silenced stories** (Kristeva, 1986); and (3) **physically reenacts lived experiences** within the context of the performers' voices and bodies (Burnham, 2003; Geer, 1998; Taylor, 2003).

Active on stage in the late nineteenth century, **Martha Graham**, one of the first feminists to become a pioneer for American modern dance, inspired many women to free the female body from its gender baggage and to pursue their own identities through the art of dance. In this paper I am particularly interested in a performative analysis of how Graham's (what I have termed) 'Greek Autochoreographies' namely *Cave of the Heart* (1946); *Errand into the Maze* (1947); *Night Journey* (1947); and *Clytemnestra* (1958) can illustrate each of the elements of theater of resistance within the social circumstances and theoretical framework each dance was choreographed in.

## (1) Theatre for social resistance critiques mainstream discourses

Since the 1920's the blatantly political nature of women's performance art was derived from the relationship of women to the dominant system of representation, situating them within a feminist critique. Their disruption of the dominant system constitutes a subversive and radical strategy of intervention vis a vis patriarchal culture. Arguably all performance art, particularly in the early years, evidenced this deconstructive intent.

As the manifestation of a burgeoning modernist sensibility, the liberated bare foot acts of Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis, or the enigmatic physical culture promoted by Delsarte cast into relief the problematic relationship between mind and body. The tiff between a Renaissance concept of self and a modernist subject constructed by cultural practices gradually died down. Performance art made understanding (in any conventional sense) difficult, critical analysis frustrating, and absolute definition impossible. As a continuation of the twentieth century rebellion against commodification, performance artists like Duncan and Martha Graham guaranteed a radical departure from fragmentation, slicing up and commercializing the female body. In real sense, it hence deconstructs the constructed structures and concepts of modernism and throws into doubt the accepted practices of knowledge acquisition and accumulation.

Autochoreographies like *Cave of the Heart*, *Errand into the Maze*, *Night Journey* and *Clytemnestra* which Graham often referred to as "plays" used Greek myths and tragedies as a common narrative. However, when observing these dances, it soon becomes evident that she stepped beyond just dancing these mythical narratives. Instead, she re-read these ancient myths and amazingly choreographed a woman's image out of it – an image that was resilient enough to be called as a 'herstory'. It encompassed the problems, hopes and struggles of a woman being performed in a new forceful art form, theatrical dance.

Autochoreography is a term coined for bringing together all the danced nuances of a dancer. It had to be devised as there was no specific term available to describe the self-choreographed and danced oeuvre of a dancer. As a woman and artist of the modern twentieth century America, Martha Graham's characters namely Medea (*Cave in the Heart*), Ariadne (*Errand into the Maze*), Jocasta (*The Night's Journey*), and Clymenestra (*Clymenestra*) symbolically grapples with their own female emotions cocooned in a patriarchal society. Medea

demonstrates the unseen monstrous jealousy that provoked her demenour. Amazingly depicting the scene of labyrinth wherein the dual with the Minotaur is portrayed, Ariadne arises as Graham's heroine; Jocasta in *The Night Journey* relives and Clymenestra creates the events that triggered her forbidding deeds and willfully embraced the eventual fate.

Analyzing the history of the interpretation of Greek myths, one evidently finds these narratives intentionally mirroring the male protagonist's point of view. The plots were clear depictions of his ventures, explorations and hardships whereas it paralleled women as either the direct or circumstantial victims of the male's decisions and actions, a pattern Simone de Beauvoir attributes to women's prehistoric dependency. Though Euripides, who was extolled as the first dramatist to open his ears and his heart to the sufferings of women (as seen in his portrayal of feminine characters such as Ariadne or Medea) remained a prisoner of his own masculine vision. Despite his sensitivity, Euripides continued to depict women as acting and reacting only in the defined space of that same male world. Medea's equation of childbirth with combat (Medea 248-251) is perhaps the best illustration of the fact that women, even in Euripidean tragedy, move, react and talk within the confines of a masculine discourse.

Further, when dwelling deep into plays of Greek playwrights including Euripides; it can be seen that women's reactions to men's domination or even adultery in the Greek plot was usually loss of words, muteness and retreat. These silent reactions were accentuated through motion and danced by the female choruses in the tragedies. This approach towards female characters and their ability to act and react was little altered in later interpretations of Greek myth and tragedy, and it remained fairly intact even in the modern twentieth-century interpretations. Graham, by choosing to narrate the myths from a modern woman's perspective, not only significantly altered the traditional narrative of the myths; following Isadora Duncan, Loie Fuller, Maud Allen and Ruth Saint-Denis, she also re-defined modern dance as the artistic medium in which women could take the 'center stage' and express their inner selves.

The radical shift to the female narrative that Graham constituted within the medium of dance affected the composition and organization of the plots. Here, there was a clear transference in focus away from the socio-political and military context that served the Greek myths and their realizations in Greek Tragedy. Graham consciously selected the private spaces of home and family occupied by women. By transforming these domestic places into symbolic spaces, as suggested by some of her dance titles, enabled Graham to chart the female's psyche, a woman's inner feelings, emotions and desires as well as her interaction with her roles as mother, wife and lover. In *Night Journey*, for instance, Graham places the events in Jocasta's bedchamber and not in the entrance to the palace, the city's central public space, as in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*. The dance initializes with Jocasta's suicide and gradates into the incestuous love between the protagonists being depicted-through her eyes-in the form of a 'flashback'. From that moment on, the events unfolded as a re-enactment of the incestuous love that would culminate in death; Tiresias and the chorus served as witnesses to her tragic fate. Graham provided substantial changes in the dance's narrative in order to focus on Jocasta and her relationship with Oedipus, her son. She consciously stroked off elements that linked the plague to the murder and provided the background to the Sophoclean *Oedipus Tyrannus*-such as Laius' murder, the Sphinx, the plague, and Apollo's oracle. No reference was made of Laius' murder or Oedipus' quest to uncover his identity. Importantly, Oedipus' punishment (the self-mutilation)-an event that precedes Jocasta's suicide-was linked only to the protagonists' recognition of their incestuous love. This purposeful backgrounding of the male public domain in order to foreground the female private domain aided Graham to illustrate a woman's inner experiences and inner struggles in dance (Yaari, 221-242.)

A similar shift in action is also seen in *Errand into the Maze*. This is a dance based on the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, wherein the hero is Ariadne, not Theseus. She, the female, enters the labyrinth to overcome the Minotaur. The dance contains no trace of the traditional male hero. By physically excluding him from the narrative, Graham suggests that we identify Theseus with the Minotaur. This implicit equation allows the story's transformation into another version of the battle between the sexes. According to de Beauvoir "man's true victory, whether he is liberator or conqueror, lies in this: that woman freely recognizes him as her destiny" (172). Carrying this logic to its modernist conclusion, Graham represents Ariadne's ordeal as an act of liberation: The finale, Ariadne's victory over the Minotaur, signifies woman's conquest over her inner fears together with her triumph over the aggressive male.

By shifting to a female mode in her adaptations, Graham treated an array of human behaviors and emotions never dealt with or even perceived in previous interpretations of classical myths and tragedies. Furthermore, by tempering her body, she uses it as an artistic medium through which women can take the 'center stage' and manifest their spirits; in order to defy the hegemony of the male language and discourse ingrained in the old narratives. "Dance" wrote Susanne Langer, "can display the ethos of a culture and gives objective shape to the subjective 'inner life'" (12). But here I would like to take the liberty to modify this quotation as "Dance can display the ethos of a culture and can objectively re-read and reiterate the subjective 'inner life.'"

## (2) Theatre for social resistance reconfigures mainstream notions of the speaking subject and gives voices to silenced stories.

During the nineteenth century, the questions around the public appearance of a woman as herself, rather than in a role, were quite debatable. A woman till then could take a role, but not of her own making and of course not herself. This is precisely where a Herculean transition came about. Modern dance ascended the stature of a woman artist, and capacitated her to create roles of her own making.

A dancer uses her own body as the prime agency to work out or strategize or choreograph a set of movements that would in turn destabilize the dominant markers of gender, sexuality and desire prevalent in the society. The body, as Judith Butler puts forth, is both an empirical and an epistemological construct that is mediated through physical, psychological, and socio-cultural boundaries. Sex evolves physically in a body whereas gender evolves socio-culturally, through one's lifetime as a way of knowing about oneself and others. In other words – the body gradually travels through time; collecting and reiterating baggages of various sedimented social norms, thus, eventually being marked as a 'gendered body'. In order for this 'gender' to appear as natural, as the inevitable product of the body's sex, the acts through which it is constituted are repeatedly performed frequently and interminably. This in turn masks off any possible apprehension of their constructedness. "Performativity" is thus for Butler "not a singular 'act' for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition" (12).

It is performativity that transforms the biological sex into a gender, wherein the latter is constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere. Precisely, this is what Butler affirms in her book *Gender Trouble* that "my body is and is not mine" (34). With such breakthroughs by leading feminist theorists like Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky, Rebecca Schneider and Julia Kristeva – body, today is looked upon as a "site" where "doing" and "being done to" becomes equivocal (Butler, 67).

By defining gender as reiterative, as a stylized repetition of social norms through time, Butler was able to unveil the conditional status of those norms and their coercive effects. This leads on to prove that gender and the identity that it produces is after all a construct. Sex, as Butler claims in *Gender Trouble* is always already gender. The body here does not antedate or 'cause' gender, but it is an effect of

the genders which can only be marked within the existing parameters of cultural norms, laws and taboos which constrain that 'choice' or marking. 'Constraint' is hence built into the process of forming any sex into a particular gender. And consequently when sex through various constraints forms gender; a gendered body with a gendered identity is born (94).

It is rather interesting to note that women's performance art has particular deconstructing potential because it positions an actual woman as a speaking subject, thus opposing the traditional conception of the single, unified (male) subject (Feral 165). The female body as subject clashes in dissonance with its patriarchal text (Silverman 197), challenging the very fabric of representation by refusing that text and posing new, multiple texts grounded in real women's experience and sexuality. This strategy is understood particularly in relation to Lacanian psychoanalysis which 'reads' the female body as Lack, or Other, existing only to reflect male subjectivity and male desire. Derived from Freudian conceptions of the psyche, Lacan's model articulates the subject in terms of processes (drives, desire, symbolization) "which depend on the crucial instance of castration, and are thus predicated exclusively on a male or masculine subject" (Silverman, 194).

For Lacan, power relationships are determined by the symbolic order, a linguistically-encoded network of meaning and signification that is internalized with the acquisition of language; and which Lacan sums up as the Name-of-the-Father, recognizing the inherent patriarchy. Theorist Julia Kristeva, by naming woman as the "semiotic" on which the symbolic order depends, creates a radical inversion of Lacanian theory, effectively negating his paradigm. In describing the semiotic as the "underside" of symbolic language, she associates it with the maternal, the feminine, although it is not necessarily delineated by sexual difference (Kristeva 67). This notion nevertheless allows for breaks in meaning in the language structure, a possibility of authentic difference articulated as an alternative to the authoritative, Name-of-the-Father linguistically-constructed society (Burke 111). It further foregrounds the psychoanalytic foundation of Woman as Other, as a construction necessary for social intercourse in the Western world. Woman has had to be constructed as opposite to man to validate and shore up the dominance of male subjectivity.

The opening up of alternative spaces or breaks in the language structure is also implicated in feminists' uncovering of issues that Lacan ignores, such as that of "the female speaker" —or, how does a woman speak (if it is not possible for her to be subject)? (Burke 111) Lacanian model woman as the culturally constructed, as Other, is trapped in man's self-representation, existing only to reflect back his image of reality, "only as a function of what she is not, receiving upon her denied body the etched-out stamp of the Other, as a signature of her void and a mark of his identity" (Féral 89). As Kaja Silverman points out, Lacanian psychoanalysis is reliant on the close interdependence of the terms "subject" and "signification", because "the discourse within which the subject finds its identity is always the discourse of the Other—of a symbolic order which transcends the subject and which orchestrates its entire history" (Silverman, 194). Then how is a woman to speak as subject, to affirm, discover, or insist upon her own identity?

It is precisely the denial of women as 'speaking subjects' that women in performance art both foreground and subvert. The intensely intimate nature of the work, the emphasis of the 'live' performing body and emotional material, not 'acted' or distanced from artist or audience, is what most characterizes this alternative, heterogeneous voice. Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis and Martha Graham were all choreographers who choreographed their own bodies to speak for themselves. It is this 'position of intimacy' that is one of the most noteworthy characteristics of women's performance, and one of the primary appeals of the genre for women. As Catherine Elwes (herself a performance artist) notes, "Performance is about the 'real-life' presence of the artist. She takes on no roles but her own. She is author, subject, activator, director and designer. When a woman speaks within the performance tradition, she is understood to be conveying her own perceptions, her own fantasies, and her own analyses" (Elwes 164).

In a Lacanian context, women performance artists thus challenge the symbolic order by asserting themselves as 'speaking subjects', in direct defiance of the patriarchal construction of discourse. "A woman performer combines active authorship and an elusive medium to assert her irrefutable presence (an act of feminism) within a hostile environment (patriarchy)" (Elwes 165). One might paraphrase this as the assertion of subjectivity within a symbolic order hostile to the female subject. If the Lacanian paradigm of the symbolic order is taken as an accurate description of Western culture, then it is debatable whether women (or men, for that matter) can ever 'escape' its identifying power; but women performance artists challenge its limitations, even its very foundations, through their direct expression of subject hood.

However, performing the body for women is inextricably linked with female sexuality—"that which is most personal and at the same time most socially determined" (de Lauretis, 184). For women performance artists, the assertion of female drives and sexuality is crucial, and their work reclaims the female body from its patriarchal textualization through "writing the body", borrowing the term from French feminist Hélène Cixous (86). Cixous agrees with Lacan that it is through language that we acquire patriarchal values, but asserts that it is therefore possible to dismantle the patriarchy through language, specifically by encouraging and exploring women's language, a language rooted in the female body and female sexuality. She sees this 'other' language as both created by and a manifestation of women's sexual difference, and exhorts women to "write the body" in order to speak their subjectivity (86). Although most women performance artists are probably unfamiliar with Cixous, they employ the strategy of disruption through expression of the female body and sexuality. If the female body has become the locus of the inscription of difference, the 'text' by which identity is read, then women's performance art is always the positioning of a female body as subject in direct opposition to its patriarchal text. Women performers challenge the very fabric of representation by refusing that text and positing new, multiple texts grounded in real women's experience and sexuality.

Martha Graham's decision to shift the mythical narrative from the male to the female point of view was no disjointed, purely intellectual choice but a result of her dance praxis. A crucial fact to remember in this regard is that Graham's choreography was created first and foremost for Graham herself. Her artistic stance reflected this history: fulfillment of the dual role of dancer/choreographer constantly required fusion of the individual and psychological in the physical, the recounting/reworking of a personal past through the material she molded into dances. "Graham's works take on a fuller meaning when we understand that they reveal familiar inner landscapes through archetypal figures," noted Sondra Fraleigh (87). Joseph Campbell, who introduced Graham to Jung's theory of archetypes, described her unique work process in these words: "Her psychological links are worked through her own experiences to emerge fresh and living. She never, never quotes undigested ideas that she has heard in someone else's voice" (Foster, 43-44).

All of Graham's theories and techniques stemmed from this duality of the individual and the archetypal as transfigured in the psyche of the dancer, character and choreographer. She describes this fusion in *The Dancer's World*: "The Theatre dressing room is a very special place. It is where the act of theatre begins. Make-up is a kind of magic, the means by which you transform yourself into the character you play." (Graham, *The Dancer's World*, directed by Peter Glushanok, Dance Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, 1957).

Graham's dances were created by a woman, the central character was a woman, the main instrument a woman's body; the medium, the dance movements, were arranged with the aim of revealing the uniqueness of woman's soul. Following this philosophy, her choreography for the 'Greek Autochoreographies' demonstrated her constant search for the specific movement that would perfectly express the character's internal motivation as it was exposed in the character-dancer relationship.

Like many other artists working in the first half of the twentieth century, Graham probed the Greek models for content and form to do more than establish an individual identity as dancer and teacher. She used myth and tragedy to construct an innovative artistic language that would meld dance and theatre. Graham's language of movement evolved during that search. As Sondra Fraleigh has indicated, Graham's angular movements are important for the construction of her "psychic truth" (87).

In a similar vein, Mark Franko has pointed out the various meanings captured by bodily contraction: "[A] scooping movement rendering the spine concave, could suggest sorrow or joy, but could also remain fundamentally obscure and even thoroughly abstract" (Franko, 39). Contraction and release, dynamic postures that are psychological and physical "self-portrait[s] of being" dominate the choreography of the "Greek Autochoreographies" dances: the expressive movements executed close to the ground; the movements emanating from the pelvis; the knee vibrations; the unique body rotations; the violent pounding on the chest and simultaneous exhaling, followed by expanding the lungs (Graham, 139). Susan Foster observes that these movements follow

... a cyclic pattern that begins at the center of the body, hollows out and then twists and spirals, opposing itself. The tension established by this relationship between the parts of the body then radiates from the center out to the periphery and even beyond, establishing a bond between dancer and the surrounding space. (25)

These movements, which literally touch everything in the theatrical space, are also designed to be consistent reminders of the link between the female individual and the universal (Foster 29). Their stylization alludes to a plurality of feelings motivated from deep within; it differentiates the movements of women from those of men:

In Graham dances, men characteristically perform simple, angular patterns with strength and directness, and they lift and carry women. Women, typically more restrained in their movements, perform a complex and wide-ranging vocabulary of movements that emphasize twist and turn of the torso. Although both sexes engage in a similar consecutive patterning of all the body parts, men tend to provide a stable grounding for women's overtly emotional dilemmas (Foster 60).

### (3) Theatre of resistance physically reenacts lived experiences

It was through the dancer's body, the music, the stage design, the costumes and the lighting that Graham was able to concretize her new personal narratives into powerful stage images to be realized in modern performances (now documented in video versions of the dances). A crucial factor in all these dances is the transformation of the performance's audio-visual components into powerful stage images designed to externalize a woman's interior landscape. In Graham's performance of her narratives, the stage itself became an emblem for her choreographic portrayal of internal experience.

Graham's cooperation with Isamu Noguchi, the noted architect who designed the decor for the dances, and Jean Rosenthal, who designed the lighting, was clearly demonstrated throughout the performance of these dances. Graham herself designed the costumes for most of her dances. Using universal symbols, they together created, on stage, a metaphoric space in which Graham could 'sculpt' her dance images. The music for Graham's 'Greek Autochoreographies' was vital for the creation of the dances and certainly merits separate research. Graham chose a different composer for each dance. She worked with well-known contemporary composers: Louis Horst, Samuel Barber, Robert Starer, Vivian Fine, Halim El-Dabh, William Schuman, Gian-Carlo Menotti, Henry Cowell, Wallingford Riegger, Aaron Copland, and Eugene Lester, whose powerful scores translated her inner/mythical landscapes into musical space on stage (Foster 26).

*Cave of the Heart* is perhaps the most apt illustration of this coordination of theatrical media. Its four characters-Medea, the Chorus, Jason and Creusa (Creon's daughter)-all have their own assigned stage area and characteristic movements. The Chorus, represented by one female dancer, sits center-stage on a kind of volcanic altar: "The volcanic pad is the volcano, the house, birth. It's the way you go back to life" (Ashton 58). The Chorus embodies the Corinthian women, and is linked to the action in a very specific way: The one-woman Chorus is the first to sense the inevitable disaster. She cries mutely, the sound of a witness fated to keep silent. But when Medea, carrying the wreath of death, starts walking towards Creusa, the Chorus tries to stop Medea-an act far more courageous than any traditional Chorus would ever permit itself; when she fails, she falls to the ground, helpless. Medea's revenge takes place despite the attempt to prevent it. Medea herself is imprisoned in a cage of sorts, with ray-like bars that remind us of her ancestor, the sun. This cage is her 'house'; there she lies, planning her vengeance. At the dance's conclusion, the cage will be transformed into the carriage of fire that detaches Medea from her human aspects.

The five stones leading to the volcano are islands in Greece. They represent the place of passage. The stones, the volcanic altar and the cage compose the space in which Medea unveils her monstrous jealousy. Three actions take place on the stage: Medea plans her revenge, the Chorus perceives Medea's plans, and the couple realizes their pure and naive attachment. Each action is motivated by a different emotion: jealousy, helplessness and love, respectively. In Graham's choreography, Creusa takes on a life of her own; she assumes a full body, with hands, arms and legs, but most of all eyes, full of the adoration and respect, which follow Jason everywhere. In Jason's and Creusa's dance movements, Graham allows Creusa to reveal her gentle character, charm and submissiveness-in stark contrast to Medea, whose violent movements tear out of the stage-space. The movements that Martha Graham choreographed for Medea are based on those of a snake or a spider crawling in its web. When she plans her revenge she is 64, lying on her belly in the cage built by Noguchi, with wire strings enclosing her.

Agnes de Mille provides a graphic description of Medea's solo: *Cave of the Heart* contains a lengthy and frenetic solo of jealous and devouring passion. It was a dance of such animal anger and frustration as to defy sense and sensibilities. It almost evoked disgust. And it was done on the knees, a long pas de bourde on the knees, including a passage of quivering, carnivorous rage in which Martha would half squat, half kneel, and vibrate her knees in and out like a hungry insect in spasms of evisceration and digestion—an effect which makes the blood run cold. After taking her revenge, Medea stands erect, center-stage. Her body begins to vibrate horribly. When constructing this scene, Graham and Noguchi used several symbols—the moon, blood, and a snake—all representing the dangerous frightening power of the female, of Medea.

In the choreographic image, these symbols are realized by different performative components: the blood becomes a long narrow red cloth Medea manipulates, the moon a component of the stage design, the snake is realized in Medea's movements and their relationships to the confines of the cage. On stage, the performance demands that Medea use the red snake-like cloth to develop a series of violent images. She chews it, spits it out, rolls it around her arm and finally throws it on the ground. She then falls, twisting her body above the cloth.

Noguchi describes the scene thus: “Medea dances with a red cloth in her mouth. She dances with the snake in her mouth. Then she spews it out of her mouth like blood”(Ballet Review 23).The result is an overpowering image of body, movement, and decor. The scenic images orchestrated with the audio-visual ingredients of the dance succeed in rendering an intense impression on the audience.

Theatre props likewise structure the indoor scene in *Night Journey*. A bed, representing Jocasta’s bedchamber, delimits the dance space as well as its scenic focus. The bed was unusual. “Noguchi brought to me the image of a bed stripped to its bones, to its very spirit” wrote Graham in her autobiography (218). On stage, the ‘bed’ is situated at the center-back of the stage. To the far right, there is a huge round stone and another structure, symbolizing an archaic gate. From the bed to the left, more stones, of varying geometric shape, form a semi-circle. At the beginning of the dance, Jocasta, a hangman’s noose around her neck, moves as if dangling. Tiresias enters from the right and awakens her –as if to urge her to relive her story. She throws the rope to the ground, ready to return to that moment when Oedipus re-entered her life.

The Chorus, carrying large laurel leaves, conducts the victorious Oedipus to Jocasta for their first meeting. From that moment on, the dance is composed as a series of stage images that unfold an unchanging, eternal story of love and disaster. The couple’s love duet culminates in a tableau. Jocasta and Oedipus become entangled in the same rope that served Jocasta to commit suicide in the opening scene, a rope that symbolizes the love connecting woman to man as well as the umbilical cord that binds mother to child. Graham uses these movements to reiterate the ties between the rope-snake-umbilical cord and its role in her theatrical dance language. At that moment, Tiresias enters and crosses –or rather leaps-across the stage to the beat of blind fate, touching every point on stage with his staff, finally to reveal the nature of the pair’s relationship by touching the rope that surrounds them, again with his staff. Revelation of their true identity fills Jocasta and Oedipus with remorse. They begin to twist about. Tiresias takes Oedipus’ victory cape and throws it to the ground; Jocasta falls on their common bed; and Oedipus, after throwing the rope to the ground, rushes to the bed, extracts the brooch from her dress and blinds himself with it. The Chorus leads him away. Jocasta then takes the rope, removes her royal robe, and hangs herself. Tiresias reappears on stage as the symbol of inescapable fate. In contrast to the confined space of Jocasta’s bed chamber, Clytemnestra’s set in a vast space that represents the “limitless landscape of a woman’s mind” (Foster 57).

Props play a particularly important role in the stage design of this dance. Their functions vary with each scenic image created at each stage of the dance. For example, two spears forming an X are brought on stage by Agamemnon’s soldiers in the first sacrificial scene. This X represents the altar on which Iphigenia is sacrificed. In the scene of Agamemnon’s return from Troy, the same spears represent the triumphal carriage that carries Agamemnon, sacker of Troy, in the victory procession. The spears reappear once more, to represent Agamemnon’s deathbed and, in the third act, when placed behind Clytemnestra’s bed, to symbolize Agamemnon’s demand for vengeance.

Another important prop is the red cloth that Clytemnestra carries during the victory reception. Graham emphasizes its dual role as both a costume and a prop: “a triumphal cape as well as the entrance to Clytemnestra’s bedchamber” (220).When Clytemnestra stands behind her throne, the red cloth seems like two huge wings; afterwards, spread before Agamemnon’s carriage, the same cloth reminds the spectators of the ‘red carpet’ scene in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*. After Agamemnon finally surrenders to his wife’s request and treads upon the cloth when walking into the palace, the red cloth fulfills still another function as the interior curtain or divider behind which Clytemnestra performs the double murder. Clytemnestra thus relives her loss four times. Graham’s choreography, in re-telling Greek myths from a feminine perspective, revived those myths at the same time that it endowed them with yet a new relevance. In the ‘Greek Autochoreographies’ the audience witnessed how Graham altered both the narratives and the main characters in order to mold the myths to her personal vision as a twentieth century woman.

In re-reading Greek myth and Greek tragedy from her personal, female dancer’s perspective, she revealed the feminine narrative locked deep within those traditional male-oriented narratives and shaped them into dance. Hence, Graham’s contribution is not restricted to the reinterpretation of Myth. She also developed a new rhetoric of movement, an innovative performative language that enabled her to express the full expanse of the tragedy penetrating women’s soul. Watching those movements, larger than life yet springing from deep within the very center of Graham’s individual being, is like witnessing a universal motif suffused with the metaphysical unveiled through private experience. At that moment, the tragic is born, but this time the tragic is properly feminine. Martha Graham’s dances are anchored in the Classical Greek tradition. Yet their contents, which powerfully express the recognition of woman’s complexity, and their form, the fusion of dance and theatre, are modern in the extreme. And I strongly believe that Martha Graham’s ‘Greek Autochoreographies’ can be rightly termed ‘Dance of resistance’ as it interrogated, resisted, voiced and empowered the silenced voices of twentieth century women worldwide!

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