

The Avenging Paintbrush: Reading the Paintings of Artemisia Gentileschi

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Abstract

Women from time immemorial have been a victim of male lust. With advancement in the society, we have been trying to give equal opportunities to every gender however, that has not reduced the suffering of women at the hands of patriarchy. Artemisia Gentileschi, a Baroque painter of the 17th century has been a casualty of sexual assault, rape and a gruelling courtroom session. The paper has minutely analysed the paintings as her modus operandi for revenge against patriarchy and society at large. The examination of Artemisia's paintings would eventually portray how the situation regarding women's well being has not changed over the years as women have to still resort to the fictional modes of self-expression to validate themselves and avenge for the injustice.

Keywords : painting, women, revenge, patriarchy, sexual violation.

Just like the pen which is considered mightier than the sword the paintbrush too is deft enough to vindicate. Artemisia Gentileschi, a female Baroque artist of 17th Century Italy through her paintings had immortalized the revenge over her sexual and mental abuses in a way assisting her future sisters to derive strength to fight back their own causes. Her revenge upon global patriarchy is best summed up in a letter to her patron where she had mentioned how her paintings would speak for themselves.



Title : Feminist Artists

Born to notable painter, Orazio Gentileschi, young Artemisia was introduced to fine arts from a tender age. The renowned Carivvagio was her father's friend and a frequent guest at the Gentileschi residence. Being sensitive to her sexuality Artemisia understood the 'male gaze' early in life and by the time she was 17 years old, she was raped by Tassi, who had earlier been appointed as her tutor and mentor. Sexual assault was not the end to her trauma, what followed next was a gruelling and embarrassing courtroom session and the appendage of shame to her name. Much like the modern times where the rape victim must give a verbal detail of the assault Artemisia too had to do the same. After a strong and confident report Artemisia was punished by tugging ropes tied to her fingers while Tassi was left untouched - only because he had a clean reputation in the eyes of the then Pope and also because his art work was neither controversial nor did they threaten the church. After a humble wedding to a modest Florentine artist the couple moved to Florence where she found another opportunity to build her name and career anew.

Life at Florence seemed blissful with Artemisia wining the patronage of a wealthy banking house (House of Medici), influencing the courtly culture, being acquaintance to Galileo and having a serene family life with husband, Pierantonio and five children. She was the only female painter to become a member of the Florentine Accademia di Arte del Disegno (Florence Academy of Fine Arts) which meant she could procure her own stationeries and take art orders in her name without the guardianship of a male name. However all the accolades could not erase the humiliations she underwent in Rome and were always freshly etched to her mind, this was given vent to in her paintings where one can find often the artist in self portraits (much like her contemporary Frida Kalho) or impersonating the characters from history which displayed women with impressive fortitude.



Title : 'Judith Slaying Holofernes' (1620-1)

Her most notable work is 'Judith Slaying Holofernes' (1620-1621) which was influenced by the previous depiction of the same story from Bible, by Caravaggio in c.1602. Most artists

had painted the scene after the beheading was done but Artemisia and a few others depicted the climax of the story. In Artemisia's painting there is determination and confidence stamped on the face of the two women who assassinate the Assyrian general, Holofernes with the women being positioned almost on top of Holofernes to hold him down. The painting by Caravaggio is neat with the women standing aside similar to the painting on the same theme by Cornelis Galle in 1610. No other illustration has been as violent and grisly as the one by Artemisia. Being a ghastly representation Artemisia painted the scene with utmost sense of practicality, an onlooker can easily perceive the strength that Judith has to exert to decapitate the head of Holofernes from the wrinkles made at her wrist. Judith rests one of her hand on a tuft of hair to have a better grip over the head while Holofernes' face clearly portrays utmost anguish. The detail of the blood in terms of its authentic colouring, staining the bed spread is palpably reminiscent of the rape Artemisia had to suffer. She might have had to produce her own bloody sheets in the court as a proof of her virginity. Artemisia must have imagined herself to be Judith while her rapist Tassi was perceived as Holofernes thereupon bringing purpose, emotion and life to the painting which might have been a partial form of catharsis for the artist.



Title: 'Susanna with Elders' (1610)

Before the revenge painting took place Artemisia was subjected to rape and an exasperating courtroom session of 7 years preceding which she had painted 'Susanna with Elders' (1610) at the age of seventeen, the same year she underwent sexual violation. It is a voyeuristic painting with a theme that has been famous among artists over time. Taken from the Book of Daniel, Susanna a Hebrew wife while alone in her ablution is strongly desired by two onlookers who coerce her to have an intercourse with them. Artemisia's version renders the most naturalised form of this subject as one can see how her Susanna shields her face from the lascivious old men. Even though it is an incompetent way of self defence however, through deep psychology one might read Susanna's physical disposition to be the only way to avert her eyes from meeting those of her intimidators. The supposed speculation behind turning the face is that Artemisia's Susanna did not want to see or remember the scene when she was exposed as what we see inevitably imprints on our mind. Artemisia must have felt the same persecution when Caravaggio and such others paid her unannounced visits, though Caravaggio's sexual orientation is under scrutiny even today. Through the courtroom sessions it was found out that Tassi had an acquaintance who too deeply coveted Artemisia and had secretly pursued her. Another of Artemisia's famous revenge painting is that of 'Judith and Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes' painted around 1623-1625, where we see Artemisia's mastery over the techniques of

chiaroscuro and tenebrism (for eg. the use of a single candle in the painting below). The painting is a matured nocturnal drama in itself and the murkiness of the scene is more prominent in the act of the maidservant who tries to put the severed head inside a bag. This act of making a maid an accomplice is a clear notion of how farsighted Artemisia was, it could have meant that to take down a man like Holofernes it needed two young and strong women but more prominent is the picture of female solidarity which surfaces in the painting. Artemisia almost beckons women to join hands against patriarchy and its power and dominance. During the trial it was known that Artemisia's chaperon was inside the house when she had called for help during Tassi's attack but she was too feeble to respond.



Title : 'Judith and Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes' (1623-5)

Artemisia's women look strong and have muscular hands and unlike the tender and pale female countenance they are confident and determined to talk of gender and power, Judith especially shows a clear thirst for vengeance in the beheading scene. Artemisia's life was initially shaped by male power in the form of Tassi's misconduct and the trial thereafter but later she managed to take the reins in her own hand. Her use of subjects and the application of reverse psychology prove ventilating to her stressed nerves as on canvas it is the man (notably Tassi) who is at the mercy of the strong woman - the artist herself. Her father had taught her to paint so that she could serve as his model and apprentice at his workshop as women in the 17th century had no means of pursuing a career but Artemisia did not baulk down from dreaming. Her rage was against society and the crime committed against women which finds no voice from the victim - much of the same and worse sadly still continues today. On 8th July we celebrated her birth anniversary and 04 months prior to it we had observed the International Women's Day, (8th March) apart from exchanging greetings let us not forget our responsibilities towards the creation of a healthier society where women do not have to use a pen or brush as an expedient for revenge.

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