

Vittoria as Victim of Gender Politics in John Webster's drama: The White Devil

Porixita Kakoty

M.A. Linguistics, University of Delhi

Sonari, Assam, India

Email - porixitakakoti@gmail.com

Abstract: The paper tries to throw light on the character of Vittoria; a female protagonist of John Webster's play *The White Devil*. The drama is a true revenge tragedy with twists of events. The themes of love, marriage, corruption in the Italian court, misogyny, power, authority and morality reflect Webster's solid Renaissance tendencies. The story centres on true-life events of the death of a young Italian noblewoman, Vittoria Accorambani in 1585. Webster took the unusual move to give the woman a voice through Vittoria's character. It is granted that Vittoria is not free from her malign for the illegitimate relationship with the duke Brachiano. But she faces extreme persecution and deceit. She is disdained for her adultery more than the actual allegations that put her under the clutches of law. Other characters do not refrain from labelling her as 'devil', 'whore'. The superficial and dominant masculinity circumscribed female chastity and modesty. However, the courage she holds, wit and oratory she owns; portray her as a heroine trapped in a blame game. She emerges as a victim in the course of actions. The medieval debate still sparks through the dialogues that condemned women responsible for man's downfall.

Key Words: revenge tragedy, misogyny, power, victim.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The *The White Devil* illustrates Webster's immaculate skill and knowledge. The play was first performed and published in 1612 at the Red Bull Theater. It received little success during the first performance for not matching the standards of the contemporary society of Webster's time. However later in the nineteenth century, the play received wide readership and praise for Webster's vivid poetry, ideas and themes with renewed perspective. John Webster (1580-1634) was famous for his tragedies with a dual vision of human nature. As a remarkable Elizabethan playwright, Webster presents the ordinary life of people with an extraordinary twist of events. The superficiality of patriarchal Italian court, law and society is exposed by delimiting some strong women protagonists in Webster's revenge plays *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. The real-life adventures of Vittoria Accoramboni and Paulo Giordano Orsini of late sixteenth-century Italy are dramatised by Webster with utmost brilliance and literary wit in *The White Devil*. The play unfolds the morbid and gloomy aspects of life. It also attracts literary praise for Webster's poetic acumen and excellent artistry. There are scenes with superstitious belief like dumb shows. As a revenge play, the double standard of human nature, madness, violence and retribution are planted to acclaim commercial gain. Vittoria is presented in the most powerful form; both as a heroine and an anti-heroine in the play. Nevertheless, the circle of events that led her to death cannot be appreciated. It felt more like subjugating women than retribution of law. The life of Renaissance women was subjugation. Women were discouraged from public participation and free choices. Those who stepped against the conventions were publically humiliated. Webster's Vittoria is no exception to it. Brachiano, Flamineo, Fransisco, Monticelso and Lodovico are seen as the epitome of power and decider of women faith. Little is left for the female characters Isabella, Cornelia and Zanche. Kate Aughterson says, "Women are double victims. In the ideal patriarchal system they are displayed as proxies of masculine power, and vessels of masculine legitimate power." (Aughterson, 2001, p.225) (1). Webster has challenged the strategies that culture places upon women.

Vittoria, raises her voice, is open about her choices. Therefore, she faces restrictions of the law and patriarchy. The death of her husband is scrutinised with her immoral and free-spirited adultery. Later, even she is murdered by Lodovico for causing the fall. The male characters hide their duality and lust for power under the name of law and culture. Even Cornelia and Isabella are silenced by the restrictive norms. Objectification and misogyny reflects from the

title where fair, beautiful and seductious Vittoria is compared to a devil. The cultural significance of beauty of women, lust and superficial belief clearly represents throughout the play. And when a woman fights against her plight she is targeted by the rule of the law.

2. DISCUSSION:

Webster's *The White Devil* stages authoritative male characters as powerful with their status, wickedness and superficiality. In reality, they fade in front of Vittoria's resoluteness and valour. In the play, Vittoria is victimized and dehumanised in a debilitated manner by the rules of the Italian court. She is not without any flaw but the penalty which she encounters can never equate with her crime.

All the characters develop around wicked Flamineo's nefarious aim of materialising his financial benefit. He disregards Vittoria's dignity and commodifies her as a tool to get Brachiano's favour. He objectifies and passes several sexist remarks on women in conversation with Brachiano. With his villainy and calculated gambit he breaks all the humanly virtues; even goes against Vittoria, Cornelia and Marcello. He murders Marcello for his secret sweetheart Zanche. Interestingly, he keeps good terms with Zanche only for his benefit. After his banishment from the court, he approaches Vittoria, blames her for the entire downfall. He plans a prank by stating that he has been ordered by Bracciano to kill Vittoria once he dies, hence forwarding the pistol to Vittoria to kill him first and then shot herself. His cruelty and double standards cross all the limits that he can be rightfully termed as a villain.

Brachiano, with whom Vittoria develops her illicit relation, tries to retain his authority over her. He was possessive and authoritarian. In (Act IV, Scene II) Francisco's fake love letter accidentally falls in the hands of Brachiano. Even without knowing the addresser of the letter, he shows extreme wrath. He calls Vittoria, a 'devil'; blames her for his wife Isabella's death.

Vittoria fights with witty repartee;

"What have I gain'd by thee, but infamy?
Thou hast stain'd the spotless honour of my house." (Act IV, Scene II) (1)

Isabella's brother Francisco is determined to take revenge on Vittoria for his sister's death. He hires pope Monticelso and Lodovico, plans to end Vittoria. He criticizes Vittoria for her adultery and infidelity. However, a shocking revelation comes out when he says;

".....I am in love
In love with Corombona; and my suit
Thus halts to her in verse" (Act IV, Scene I) (1)

Monticelso or Pope Paul IV stands as a hypocritical villain who uses his power and authority to shatter Vittoria's dignity, punishes her to stay in a house of "converties". During the trial session, he chooses to speak in Latin with utmost derogatory remarks assuming that Vittoria will not understand his speech. But Vittoria proves her intelligence. Although she understands Latin she requests him to speak in a common language so that other people could also understand the injustice to which she falls prey. Vittoria is not directly involved in the murder, though some critic points to her dream as the cause that sparks this idea to Brachiano and Flamineo. Yet no legal evidence could put her behind the bars on murder allegations. So, Monticelso knits the idea to malign her for adultery.

Marcello, who is Vittoria's brother, otherwise proves to be pious and just; also criticizes Vittoria with cruel remarks. While he, himself fights with his brother Flamineo over Zanche. He confirms his duality and authoritativeness.

"Oh, my unfortunate sister!

I would my dagger-point had cleft her heart" (Act III, Scene-I) (1)

Cornelia, Vittoria's mother and Isabella portray the image of obedient Renaissance women stuck within the patriarchal codes. Cornelia blames Vittoria and Brachiano with harsh words for their adultery and curses for their death.

Isabella, on the other hand; moves the audience with her simplicity and innocence but when comes to know about her husband's adultery she accuses Vittoria of being more responsible.

".... dig the strumpet's eyes out; let her lie

Some twenty months a-dying; to cut off

Her noses and lips, pull out her rotten teeth," (Act II, Scene I) (1)

Besides, she is treated with ruthless negligence and hate. She has been mocked as a 'devil' several times. Vittoria condemns the shallow ideals that place the woman as a whore, when departing norms of passivity. On such allegation, during her arraignment Vittoria says,

"Ha! whore! what's that?" (Act III, Scene II) (1)

Vittoria is against all the allegations and emerges as a lady with indomitable fortitude. One cannot stop appreciating her presence of mind and spirit. The strength and vehemence she displays in her replies to Monticelso definitely deserves acknowledgement.

"I will not weep;

No, I do scorn to call up one poor tear

To fawn on your injustice.." (Act III, Scene II) (1)

The patriarchal Italian court directs the charges towards Vittoria, both her husband's murder and for her adultery. Whereas, Brachiano does not face any public humiliation as such. Vittoria leaves no stone unturned to break the limitations. She does not compromise in her action and speech. Even the English Ambassador praises her courage and oratory "She hath a brave spirit" (Act-III, Scene-II). Sensabaugh(1965) (3) says, "Though her life was at stake, Vittoria herself ridiculed the prosecuting lawyer for his postured and inflated language." Although, Sensabaugh comments on Vittoria as a replica of Milton's Satan; yet not abstained from giving due recognition to her valour and sharpness. Such character of women in Renaissance Italy is rare and considered licentious. Vittoria tries to expose corrupt patriarchy and authoritative court laws that silence women. Her prosecutor relentlessly engages in proving her as guilty under the shed of court laws. But Vittoria refuses to weaken her valour. As a consequence she is ordered to stay in the place of pertinent whores, and the eventful death. Laura Bromely (1991) (4) says, "The language of men in Vittoria's society reveals that they perceive women only in terms of sexual stereotypes" further she adds "Any woman whose behaviour departs from norms of passivity and silence is labelled and condemned as a 'whore', 'fury', or 'devil'. She received sympathy from the audience for the injustice meted out to her. Superficial patriarchy, corruption, the duality of human nature and deficiencies of the church raise suspicion to the audience. Her ultimate fate is death but she fights every moment to make her voice heard. Even death seems like a victory in front of her plight. Monticelso, himself admits there is little evidence supporting the murder accusation upon Vittoria, instead, the court would involve in bringing her defamation.

"For sir you know we have naught but circumstances

To charge her with, about her husband's death;

Their approbation therefore to the proofs

Of her black lust, shall make her infaous

To all our neighbouring kingdoms.." (Act-III, Scene-I) (1)

With the title of the play *The White Devil*; readers presume fair and beautiful Vittoria to be devilish for her adultery. The title is contrasting in itself. Because White is generally associated with peace and purity, the devil symbolises violence, deceit and the dark human side. So, the other perspective to the play might present the Vittoria who got embroiled in the race of power politics and gender structure.

Vittoria stands amidst all allegations in an unstable situation since; if she does not defend her case she will be guilty of all accusations. On the other hand, if she voices out to prove her innocence in the murder case she will be blamed for her rebellious and unsubmitive nature, unusual for a Renaissance woman.

3. CONCLUSION:

John Webster in the play *The White Devil* has successfully presented Vittoria as a strong-willed but tragic heroine. The cruelty and mischievous treatment served to Vittoria are not welcoming in a civilised world. But it is the strictness and shallow church codes that limit women under the clutches of dark patriarchy. For her adultery, without any argument, she is to be blamed but that blame should involve Brachiano as well. Vittoria faces ruthless castigation and meets retribution. Vittoria triumphs against all the prototypical Renaissance women for which she is victimised. Modern audiences and readers feel more compassion towards Vittoria as a woman with a voice; than the seventeenth century could have feasibly appreciated.

REFERENCES:

1. <http://fulltextarchive.com> <h1>The White Devil by John Webster</h1>
2. Aughterson, Kate. Webster: The Tragedies (Analyzing Texts). New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.
3. Sensabaugh, George F. (1965), Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900, Vol. 5, No. 2, Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama, Rice University. (Spring, 1965), pp. 345-361
4. Bromely, Laura. "The Rhetoric of Feminine Identity in The White Devil." In Another Country: Feminist Perspectives on Renaissance Drama. Ed. Dorothea Kehler and Susan Baker. Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1991. 50-70
5. Hamamra, Bilal. (2016). Silence, Speech and Gender in Webster's The White Devil: A Presentist Palestinian Perspective. 19. 19-1.
6. Lameaa, Asst & Rashid, Ahmed & Asst, & Ikhlas, Muhammed & Nati, M & Nati, Ikhlas. (2020). Transcending Patriarchal Limitations: A Study of John Webster's The Duchess of Malfi. A research presented By. 10.13140/RG.2.2.12594.63682.