



USES OF ALLEGORY IN VAN HERK'S JUDITH

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to portray the feminist representation of Aritha Van Herk. The novelist knits the reality through her protagonists. Aritha Van Herk is a Canadian women novelist. She is one of the writers who made the Canadian literature to international standard. She is well known by her first novel, *Judith*. Her writings always talks about power of women and how she gives space to women in her stories. She conveys the male domination and women's move against it. She consciously uses allegory in this novel, *Judith*. She compares her characters with Circe of *The Odyssey* and Holophernes of *The Apocrypha*. She brings *The Old Testament* and reflects the character in her novel. She describes the power and sexuality in most of the places of this novel. To convey, she takes the tool of allegory in order to illustrate to this world. Thus, this paper examines allegory which is used by Van Herk in her novel. One can understand the power of women and their representation through allegory.

Key words: Aritha Van Herk, Judith, Allegory, Canadian literature, Women's writing

In *Judith*, Aritha Van Herk deliberately compares men to pigs. For instance, from her description of pigs and, Judith's care and love for pigs, one can easily understand how women are superior to men. Judith spends most of her times with pigs taking care of them. She brings them up as her pets. And she also considers pigs as men. She says that men also like pigs. Pigs have also sexual intercourse like men. Only out of sexual pleasure pigs have sexual intercourse and men also have the mindset that sexual intercourse is for pleasure not for anything else. Here, Van Herk indirectly criticizes that men also like pigs. She equates pigs with men.

The novel does not end as so many women's novels do, with the heroine getting her man. The sexual encounter between Jim and Judith is followed by a sexual encounter between two pigs during which Judith and Jim's mother, Mina, agree that the male role in the life process is minimally significant: "that's all he gets to do, only limited usefulness" (J 186). The sow seems to agree:

Outside the fence Mina and Judith started to clap. The boar turned startled orange eyes on them as if caught doing something foolish. Then blindly he turned again to Marie Antoinette but she whoofed and snarled at him. His necessity dispensed with, she wanted no more of him. At that the two women clapped again.

You tell him, Marie Antoinette, cried Mina. "You tell him." And together they laughed, those insane women, laughed at everything they could and as hard as they could as they danced about in the melting snow. (J 187)

Transforming herself as a pig farmer, she does castration better than a male (Jim). By doing it, she successfully tries to control the power of male, symbolically demolishing the male power. By taking knife and doing castration for pigs, she performs the role of a man. By doing castration to pigs, all by herself she shows her hatred towards men and indirectly gives the idea that all men should be castrated and be made sexuality inactive. Women are dependent on men only for sex. By equating pig with man and also castrating Judith shows her hatred towards male dominance over women.

Doing castration is considered as a work of a male. In *Judith*, Jim does that imperfectly but whereas Judith, the protagonist does it perfectly. So she plays the role of a man and breaking the rules of woman which is considered as convenient rules for protagonist, in the novel *Judith* by deconstructing. This act of going against the norms gets the attention of the critics especially the male. Judith slowly changes herself from a soft lady to a valiant woman. This change makes her undertake the task of man, as a pig farmer. One cannot term Judith as a man hater, because she is very sincere and conscious in accomplishing her father's wish and in becoming a pig farmer.

At first 'Jim' castrates the pigs in the farm. But he is incapable of castrating pigs. He wrongly castrates the pigs, and made them shed blood. Judith, who sees all this ridiculous stuff of Jim, voluntarily takes up that job and castrates the pigs without fear. It shows the courage and bravery of Judith. On the surface level, it shows that Judith has courage and bravery but in the deeper level it shows the 'power' of

women. Even Jim appreciates and admires Judith's ability and capacity to castrate pigs. And he is somewhat frightened by Judith's power.

From this incident, one can also understand that Judith's compassion and sympathy over pigs. So, she plays a dual role here, one is the womanly nature of compassion and sympathy; and another one is the power over men. By all these points Van Herk symbolizes that 'castration of pigs' means 'castration of male-domination'. By castrating pigs, Judith feels that she has some kind of superiority over men.

From this point, one can understand that Van Herk utilizes Judith to reduce the reputation of male-dominated and male-chauvinistic society. Because, from time immemorial, 'castration' is a traditional symbol of male power but here Van Herk portray Judith as an 'Iconoclast' (reducer of one's reputation) against men, and male-power:

She castrated all them all. Swift and cruel she pierced them, slicing so fast there was hardly time for blood to flow, flicking their testicles onto the floor of the chore-house like offending parasites. ...Judith castrated the last pig, then threw down the scalpel and stood erect, stretching tired arms above her head. She plunged her hands into the pail of warm water, blood swirling away from them, then dried them on one of the rags. Sighing deeply, she flung the straw bales out of the barn and into the snow to freeze the stink of blood and fear out of them. (J 178)

Ironically, at the moment Judith most clearly proves her ability to function better than a man in a traditional male role; Van Herk evokes the traditional sinister image of female power: the witch. The narrator, in one of the rare figurative statements in the novel, has already prepared for this image by identifying the witch: "Not even Circe's turning men into swine could equal it [castration]" (J 173), and later emphasizes the image of Judith as castrating witch by referring to the piglets as "Circe's humans" (J 179).

In *The Odyssey*, the image of Circe is double; she uses her power to transform Odysseus's men: "For now to all appearance they were swine: they had pig's heads and bristles and they grunted like pigs; but their minds were as human as they had been before the change" (J 162). The god Hermes warns Odysseus that he must bed Circe if he wishes to free his men, but warns him, "When she has you stripped she may rob you of your courage and your manhood" (J 163). However, after Odysseus succeeds in

gaining the witch's favor, she not only releases his men but also provides good advice to aid Odysseus in his next two adventures.

Van Herk's use of the Circe image for Judith evokes both aspects of the image. Taking the knife, a traditional symbol of male power, from Jim and succeeding where he is inadequate, her power threatens Jim's masculinity:

Jim held them silently, sweating, his eyes averted from hers in some other icy cast of fear. She could almost have asked him to lie down on that bale, had she done it with the same coolness and finesse that she tackled them, she who had never before held that blade in her hand, her father always hiring a neighbour to help, refusing even when she was eighteen to let her near the barn while they were castrating. Perhaps he did not want her to witness a male emasculating a male, the castration of his common humanity, saved himself from her discovery of his own sexuality. (J 176)

Judith's name signals the connection with the story of Judith and Holofernes in *The Apocrypha*. The ancient heroine, a widow running a large estate, chastises the Israelite men for being ready to surrender the town and announces, "I am going to do a deed which will be remembered among our people for all generations" (Gottwald). After fasting and prayer, she transforms herself: "She put on sandals and anklets, bracelets and rings, her ear-rings and all her ornaments, and made herself very attractive, so as to catch the eye of any man who might see her" (Gottwald). Using a combination of cunning wisdom and her physical beauty, she arouses the interest of the enemy general until he "shook with passion", but she comes to his tent when he is "dead drunk" and cuts off his head with his sword. Returning home, she displays the head and announces, "Though my face lured him to destruction, he committed no sin with me, and my honour is unblemished" (Gottwald). Seeing the head on the battlements panics the enemy forces panic, and so the town is preserved. Judith continues to live on her estate, and though she has many suitors, she remains unmarried.

Van Herk transforms the widow into a woman who has left a lover, the estate into a pig farm, the beheading into castrating piglets, and the sackcloth into grubby work clothes, updating the ancient story to fit a modern context while retaining its archetypal structure. Her ability to succeed when men fail without losing her sexual desirability and her ability to use her sexuality without losing her honor or becoming dependent on a male makes Van Herk's Judith, like her ancient prototype, a strong image of

female power. The strong parallels heighten our sense of the significance of the modern Judith's actions; she too sets an example that can bring deliverance to her society.

In *The Old Testament*, there is a context which resembles the story of Judith. In that context, the main character is also 'Judith', who is a Queen of a country. She is a charming, courageous and a valiant girl. She has great potentiality and power over things under the sun. She resembles 'Judith' of Van Herk.

Once, the neighbouring King has waged a war against Judith's country. While he waged a war against her, Judith's captain bravely announced that he will lead her troop and will win that king. But in the war fled the captain field from war and withdrew his army. At that time, the Queen, with all her courage and endeavor took a stubborn and obstinate decision that she can also war against the enemy and prove herself superior to men. So, she led the troop and played a tricky role in the war field.

She plotted against the king to defeat him with her beauty. She cleverly invited the king to a lonely place and she attracted and mesmerized the king by using her beauty and invited him to have sexual intercourse with her. The king lost his control while having sexual intercourse with her, she shrewdly cut off the king's head and held it on a sharp weapon and placed it in her place. It shows the power of her beauty and intellectualism. Here she played the role of Queen and proved the proverb 'Coward dies many time before death, valiant never tasted death but once'.

Through this context one can know that women can even use 'sexual intercourse' as a kind of power to defeat her enemies. Similarly, Van Herk's Judith is also a very cute and courageous woman, who dares to do anything which is equal to men. She is capable of doing men's job better than men. In this novel, Judith utilizes her sexuality and power, gets a M.G. car as a compliment from her city lover. In her past life, she had sexual intercourse with her city lover and got a car from him. It is also a kind of power used by women.

The protagonist of the novel *Judith* is a symbolical expression of Van Herk. According to *The Old Testament*, there is the story of a brave woman named, Judith. There the woman Judith stands for the victory of her country over the other. She uses her femininity and the weakness of the King to defeat the army of the opponent country. This valiant portrayal of Judith is a symbolical expression because generally man is a symbol of war and battle. But in *The Old Testament*, the woman Judith won the war with her perfect plan and the courageous movement. This same story is reflected in Van Herk's Judith. Here the main character also has taken up the task of men and successfully won the admiration of the

readers. More over, she never felt that, she had committed the mistake of returning from city or resigning the post of secretary. Van Herk highlights the parallel between her main character Judith and the character in *The Old Testament*. This perfectly establishes her reputation as a feminist. Thus, she expresses power of women through her characters and deliberately uses an allegory to emphasis the feminism.

References

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