

SAMSON AGONISTES FINAL ACT: AN ANCIENT TERRORISM

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Abstract

John Milton in his distinguished tragic drama, *Samson Agonistes*, has attempted to clarify Samson as a chosen, pious warrior of God who sacrifices himself for destroying the enemies of God. Revenge in Milton's literary texts, *Samson Agoniste* and *Paradise Lost*, is portrayed due to different causes. Following the ancient taste of revenge, Milton still looks for a glorified view of revenge. Moreover, for Samson, revenge is considered as a concept of justice and equally a spectacular act of holy violence as if his deed is justified as a vehicle for a divinely sanctioned revenge. Despite these two functions of revenge, the psychological analysis of the notion of vengeance in this paper is surveyed to demonstrate Samson Agoniste immersing into revenge and also creating an image of violence and terrorism. This non appreciable image is growing more as an international horror.

Keywords: Samson Agonistes, collectivist, revenge, suicide bomber, power, psychology, John Milton

"hath disgrac'd me, ...laugh'd at my losses, ... laugh'd at my nation, ...-- and what is his reason? Because I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands? ...if you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that." (Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, III.i.46-63)

1. INTRODUCTION

There are two patterns for following the notion of revenge; *Bible* "an eye for an eye" and Martin Luther King's response to that "The old law of 'an eye for an eye' leaves everybody blind". (Price) The judgment upon these two statements leads us to think upon two implications: power seeking and providing a way to keep order in a society which indeed they both denote that an avenger has a right to do justice whether obligatory or optional. In this paper, psychological analysis is involved in order to have a discerning eye on the notion of revenge.

In this respect, social psychologist Michele Gelfand from the University of Maryland in May 2008, in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (Vol. 95, No. 6) published a paper analyzing the different events which trigger the revenge process in different cultures; American students feel more offended when their rights are violated, whereas Korean students feel more offended when their sense of duty and obligation is threatened. It has also been found that collectivists are more likely than individualists to avenge another's shame. To collectivists, shame to someone with a shared identity is considered an injury to one's self. As a result, revenge is more spreadable in collectivist cultures. (Price, 23)

It's important to mention that the emotions responding to revenge is different across cultures. According to Gelfand, anger often drives the vengeful feelings of people in individualistic cultures, while shame empowers revenge in collectivist ones. It's important to note that the perception of the transgression depends largely on how much it violates a group's cultural values. According to the paper *The Drama of Suicide Terrorist* published in July 2008 in the volume of *Suicide Bombers: The Psychological, Religious and Other Imperatives*, the vocabulary of the collectivist is different from the individualist showing difference in their system of thought.

Honor in the collectivist society is a question of life or death because all the emotional refueling in this society is coming from outside. In collectivist societies, the conflict tends to be interpersonal and not intrapersonal. They tend to experience the world in terms of shame, honor, mercy, envy, flattering, begging, fear and power - all feeling with an external locus of control. By comparison, the individualists have an internal locus of control. Shame turns to guilt. In order to feel shame one has to be seen doing something wrong but guilt is an internal feeling one carries within oneself everywhere.

In one instance, a teacher trying to explain a father belonging to a collectivist society to send his daughter to school on time, saying "we honor you and your family and we expect you to honor school as well", the father changes the conduct immediately. That's the matter of difference in the collectivist's vocabulary and basically system of thought compared with the individualists as Grosbard is focusing.

Ian McKee from Adelaide University in Australia in May 2008 published a paper in *Social Justice Research* (Vol. 138, No. 2) about the vengeful tendencies and the motivational values that cause certain outlooks; people who are more vengeful tend to be those who are motivated by power, authority and the desire for status. They don't want to lose face. In this study, 150 university students were surveyed who answered questions about their attitudes toward revenge, authority and tradition and group inequality. It was found that the students, whose answers showed deference to authority and respect for traditions and social dominance, had the most favorable opinions about revenge and retribution. In this matter, people tend to be less forgiving, less compassionate and less focused on universal type values (Price, 11). The phenomenon of suicide terrorism in *The Drama of The Suicide Terrorist* is said that it's been for many years a part of various traditional collectivist societies and not a part of modern individual ones. This phenomenon isn't connected directly to a specific religion but to a collectivist, tribal state of mind.

2. REVENGE IN SAMSONE AGONISTE

John Milton's piece of art brings to life Samson Agoniste as long as this text exists. The poem is about a tribal revenge and it's more a tragedy than a morality play. The traditional reading of *Samson Agoniste* has changed because today the contemporary readers have faced suicide bombers for decades; they surely analyze this story differently. For Instance, the attack of 11 September 2001 or London attacks of July 2005 can demonstrate a new Samson who for sake of self-disgrace and a specific belief system is massacring. Of course, for Samson, the definition of justice is based on his tribe's legitimacies. This statement was found from 9/11 from one of the hijackers: "I pray God to forgive me all my sins...permit me to glorify you in every possibly way." It signifies a modern version of Samson. This is some superficial similarity and comparison between Samson and the images of terrorists as a birthplace of hate and revenge.

Milton's *Paradise Lost* depicts also the elements of revenge. Adam's and Eve's fall from Paradise causing emotions like the desire for revenge that motivates the whole narration. In *Paradise Lost*, there's a particular revenge which must be taken on God by Satan. He's the creator of Adam and Eve. Then, it turns for them to take revenge on Satan. It is Adam's desire for revenge. Revenge is what Adam finds as a good reason to go on. Underneath this emotional transformation, as it seems, is another major shift. Adam has now connected Satan to his target of anger. Indeed, this is what allows the emotion to become revenge.

Now as getting closer, in *Samson Agoniste*, we study a play filled with tragic flaws which represents the exact definition of tragedy. Based on the soliloquies, Samson's sadness and lamentations are personal, "sit a while and bemoan his condition" (Milton, preface); he was betrayed, captivated and lost his eyes, "Betray'd, Captiv'd, and both my Eyes put out" (33). He has lost his reputation and fame, "Now blind, dishearten'd, sham'd, dishonour'd, quell'd" (563). He was ruled by lust and now he's regretful, "But Love constrain'd thee; call it furious rage/To satisfie thy lust: Love seeks to have Love" (836). And more important, he made a bind with a philistine woman, a tribe which was many times named as an enemy, "Why thou shouldst wed Philistian women rather/Then of thine own Tribe fairer, or as fair/ At least of thy own Nation, and as noble" (216). After all he has unveiled his secrets, "unbosom'd all my secrets to thee/ Not out of levity, but over-powr'd" (879). This causes his own misfortune stated in his lamentations. A cautious reader might doubt on divine characteristics of Samson.

Philistines are enemies of Israel; Samson's tribe, "the Philistines, Idolatrous, uncircumcised, unclean" (1364), "The Philistine, thy Countries Enemy" (238). Father warns Samson, but it doesn't work; Samson has married an enemy, revealed his secrets to her, lost his power and now is a captive. Manoah, Samson's father, tries to save his son, "to procure his liberty by ransom" (preface), but son refuses. He prefers to be left alone and pay for his sin:

Samson. Spare that proposal, Father, spare the trouble
Of that solicitation; let me here,
As I deserve, pay on my punishment;
And expiate, if possible, my crime,
Shameful garrulity. To have reveal'd
Secrets of men, the secrets of a friend,
How heinous had the fact been, how deserving
Contempt, and scorn of all, to be excluded
All friendship, and avoided as a blab,
The mark of fool set on his front?
But I Gods counsel have not kept, his holy secret
Presumptuously have publish'd, impiously,
Weakly at least, and shamefully: A sin
That Gentiles in thir Parables condemn
To thir abyss and horrid pains confin'd (487-501)

At this time let us face the criteria of power seeking in the realm of revenge which is dominant in Samson's tale. Religious groups and tribes, basically most collectivist cultures, have multiple times encountered with this emotional state or system of belief, i.e. revenge. An avenger, a self-considering victim, is now a harm doer, like a suicide bomber. According to *Drama of The Suicide Terrorist*, before the suicide bomber decides to carry out his mission, usually he's been in a bad mood. Often he's a young man who hasn't found his place in the family and society. The same feeling can be found in Samson's lamentation who finds himself scorned, humiliated, disobedient to God and for that he is shameful. And at the moment, he decided to carry out the mission he felt euphoric. Everything now falls in to place for him and his world is ordered and organized. His life has a meaning (Grosbard, 48).

In order to understand this cognitive-emotional turn over (cognitive because now he has answers for his questions; emotional- from down to high feelings) we have to comprehend that in some collectivist societies humiliation is often an inescapable part of the educational process of a child. In order to understand what it means to grow up in a collectivist society with an authoritarian father, a Westerner [individualist] must think about a relationship with God. God is always right. And while a disobedient is punished, due to defense mechanism, he thinks he deserved it. (54) According to *Drama of The Suicide Terrorist*, the defense mechanism of identifying with aggressor and the state of mind [the matter of interpersonal] that accompanied it characterizes many people belonging to traditionalist-collectivist societies. In an attempt to identify Samson with a suicide bomber, he in all ways is accepting that it is God's will that punishes him. This humiliation position usually doesn't have a specific end because the child has to obey his father as long as he has a father, and has to obey political/religious leaders and God throughout his entire life. (97)

Back to the drama, Manoah disagrees. He pleads him to return to his country, God's holy land, "But God hath set before us, to return thee/Home to thy countrey and his sacred house" (518). Father and son both mention that Samson is not only a simple man gifted with power but also this power is heavenly and he is chosen, "divulg'd the secret gift of God" (201), "But I Gods counsel have not kept, his holy secret/Presumptuously have publish'd, impiously,/Weakly at least, and shamefully: A sin" (499). As Philistine's betrayal is proved, undoubtedly they come to the conclusion that this power was meant to destroy the enemy. The notion of revenge is gradually is planted, "Wilt thou then serve the *Philistines* with that gift/which was expressly giv'n thee to annoy them?" (578)

Our potential suicide terrorist feels humiliated, "Contempt, and scorn of all" (494). His deepest humiliation is not from the enemy but probably from his father. The frequent adolescent rebellion that we witness, in the most virtually doesn't exist in this sense in traditional-collectivist societies. In such a society, parents decide for child whom to marry and what to choose as occupation (Grosbard, 102-4). Bonding with a girl who is not only an enemy but also whom father warned not to choose and even revealing his power which was holy and given by God led him to his downfall; humiliation and torture. Samson can't overcome this humiliation. As a collectivist person he's going to obey his father throughout his life to bring honor to family [or the tribe]. The honor he had dreamed of gaining instead of the humiliation throughout his life is finally achieved (102-9).

The collectivist culture bound with religious point of view is obvious, “serve My Nation, and the work from Heav'n impos'd” (565). God and Samson stand in two extremes but with more and less power, “Happ'n what may, of me expect to hear/Nothing dishonorable, impure, unworthy/Our God, our Law, my Nation, or my self” (1425). Samson wishing to pay for his sin and taking revenge for his pain, “Then turn'd me out ridiculous, despoil'd,/Shav'n, and disarm'd among my enemies” (540), at the feast he ruins the palace upon the philistines as soon as he discovers that he got his power back.

In this situation (captive, insulted, shamed) in order to survive, the feeling of revenge is the only weapon that one can have. This feeling can be judged with either theology or psychology and this man needs to die with glory besides taking vengeance to those who deserve it. And here it comes a question: did they do wrong to God? Omitting the background of philistines at least they've done wrong to Samson.

The concept of “killing” can't justify the reader's morality sense. Who judges and by which law a mass killing happens? It's difficult to accept the identical impulse of hero and God as there's no evidence for that. According to Grosbard, in collectivist tradition to kill the enemy and die with him is considered a higher degree of heroism than to kill the enemy and to survive. This is because you prove your total loyalty. In another hand, Samson unconsciously seeks for satisfaction and vindication for his death. Before maybe, but today and tomorrow he won't be a loser. In this sense, his death has a meaning, “How dy'd he? death to life is crown or shame” (1579). Samson's tribe defend his death:

Chorus. O dearly-bought revenge, yet glorious!
Living or dying thou hast fulfill'd
The work for which thou wast foretold
To *Israel*, and now ly'st victorious
Among thy slain self-kill'd
Not willingly, but tangl'd in the fold
Of dire necessity, whose law in death conjoin'd
Thee with thy slaughter'd foes in number more
Then all thy life had slain before (1659-67)

Manoa. Come, come, no time for lamentation now,
Nor much more cause, Samson hath quit himself
Like Samson, and heroicly hath finish'd
A life Heroic, on his Enemies
Fully reveng'd, hath left them years of mourning,
And lamentation to the Sons of Caphtor
Through all Philistian bounds. To *Israel*
Honour hath left, and freedom, let but them
Find courage to lay hold on this occasion,
To himself and Fathers house eternal fame;
And which is best and happiest yet, all this
With God not parted from him, as was fear'd,
But favouring and assisting to the end.
Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail
Or knock the breast, no weakness, no contempt,
Dispraise, or blame, nothing but well and fair,
And what may quiet us in a death so noble (1708-24)

Manoa and chorus represent *Israel's* tribe praising Samson for his last deed; he, lying among slaughtered enemies, had a victorious death. His death was heroic and it is honor left for his people. Even though Manoa finds it a drastic way to revenge, “Manoa. O lastly overstrong against thyself! / A dreadful way thou took'st to thy revenge” (1591), Samson is respected for he brought eternal fame and there's nothing to mourn for them but to enemy.

Again in *Paradise Lost*, Adam and Eve after fall of heaven wake up and they feel ashamed. The feeling of shame after the fall is the same with Samson, “That were an ignominy and shame beneath/This downfall...” (115). John Milton shows how Samson goes through a process of psychological regeneration which eventually turns him into the “hero of faith”; the vengeful Samson is defended as a brave saint moved by the Spirit to carry out God's militant work against enemies. By a close review, it's been seen how Milton tried to humanize Samson. However, he might have thought this honorable great act of Samson may remain the first and last in fiction.

In recent years, there has been catastrophes constructed by some certain groups and societies - such as those in largely lawless Somalia or in areas of the Middle East where tribal rule holds more dominance than the national government which are more inclined to seek revenge because there's just no other way to gain justice, particularly in countries in which the regime lacks legality. Studying Samson as a similar character to a suicide bomber image provides the fact that his tendency is in every time a current example. Through the beginning of the twenty-first century, some 200 suicide attacks took place around the world. A dramatic increase in suicide terrorism around the world began in early 2000, and overall some 3,500 suicide attacks have taken place over the last three decades (Rosner, Yogev and Schweitzer).

3. CONCLUSION

By looking into what motivates revenge, and by increasing our knowledge about how revenge makes us feel and act, it might be possible to combine the best aspect of justice and revenge. Feelings of revenge have been considered as one of the common emotions felt by individuals who choose to enlist in terrorist organizations which are following justice based on their rules. Whether this is revenge for fallen comrades or revenge for ideological injustices, revenge often plays a prominent role in the genesis of terrorist movements, the commission of terrorist acts and is even often perceived in counter terrorism efforts (Bradford, Wilson).

Story of Samson is educational for it shows a society in which revenge was not only normal, but also forgiven and praised. Far from this poem, revenge has, for the most part, become a highly glamorized idea in today's culture. This romanticized idea of vengeance should be most interesting to those who undertake legal learning. Through the world of literature, a legal scholar, judge, or advocate can better understand the dark area that truly encompasses the essence of vengeance. Studying characters throughout literature and applying the lessons they provide to legal learning illuminate the various emotions of both victims and harm doers, specifically known as suicide bombers. As long as the idea of revenge exists, it will remain as a popular motif in tomorrow's societies as it has always been. At all costs we must save Milton's poem from the memorable charge of Samuel Johnson as he wrote about this tragedy: "ignorance has admired and bigotry applauded."

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