

The Chalice of Faith and Femininity: Women and Religion

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Programme: Fine Art: Studio, Site & Context (BA)

Module: Independent Project

Module Code: ADAA6000

Supervisor: Professor Sue Williams

Date of Presentation (Submission): 14th December 2022

Word Count: 4970

(excludes title page, table of contents, list of figures, in-text titles of chapters, in-text captions of illustrations and bibliography)

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of BA (Hons) University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Swansea. (14th December 2022)

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Introduction

Gloria Steinmen, highly regarded as the leader of modern-day feminism, highlights in an interview with Jennifer Aniston, that religion is a subtle and neglected, but incredibly influential restraint on women's freedom, rights, and their perception on a personal level, and in society (Steinmen, MAKERS Conference, 2013). Whilst there is a philosophical or theological debate which can had regarding the purpose of religion and its consequent impositions, this thesis solely examines how elements of religion has controlled women, both in the past and our current era, how this control has evolved, and how it impacts women in different facets of their life.

As a woman who comes from a traditional orthodox Christian culture, this thesis will focus on aspects of Christianity. This thesis naturally complements my own experiences and is one of my main motivations for writing it. Having observed and experienced misogyny sourced and disguised under religious pretexts, I have been keen to delve into the subject further as to have an informed view as to why women are viewed the way we are. I have also struggled with fitting into such an upbringing myself, so the impact of such a lifestyle on the lives of women like me was also of great interest.

Women are portrayed in many faiths as temptresses who lure men away from the divine. As with Eve, the first woman in the Bible to disobey God and bring about the fall of man. The mothers' roles—nurturing, caring for children, and giving birth—were assigned to women. Although they are portrayed as important and good roles, patriarchal institutions are strengthened, and gender stereotypes are reinforced. Women who choose not to conform to these stereotypes or social conventions are not only going against the conservative family expectations, but also against God's will. Although many religious texts are represented only by male prophets, saints and ultimately The Father and The Son, many rules of religious cultures and customs restrict the freedom of women, for example, rules on abortion, contraception, marriage and divorce.

This essay discusses the problem of gender inequality and how religion, often facilitates the discrimination of women and other minorities. It discusses the church's restrictions on women's lives and bodies, the shame and guilt-based culture, and the significance of feminism in contemporary art. To understand the subject further, this thesis will journey

through older representations of women in Christianity, to modern responses and representations of how women are represented and affected by religion in today's era.

The first chapter of this thesis concentrates on two iconic biblical figures—the Virgin Mary and St. Mary Magdalene—as they were portrayed in art from the Middle Ages to the renaissance period. In an effort to avoid providing a lustful allusion toward the holiness of the Holy Mother, we see painters abstract the breasts of the Madonna who is breast-feeding. In contrast, Veronese and Carreno intentionally portrayed St. Mary Magdalene in a sensual manner, emphasising her breasts in order to draw attention to her prior immoral existence.

The second chapter examines the culture of virginity and how women are valued solely for a physical characteristic, and those who do not achieve these standards are considered unworthy. The focus here is the allegory presented by the *Unicorn Tapestries* (1495-1505) and its implications for the perception of women. Despite the fact that the creator of the tapestry is unknown, the tapestry has become a famous and an influential part of art history, gathering the attention of many prominent figures throughout time due to its rich symbolisms.

The third chapter revisits our modern day, and puts into context the impact of religion and religious symbolism by looking at the contemporary feminist artists Tai Shani, Gina Pane and Catherine Opie. Their artwork represents the effect of religious imposition on women, but also a response by women to these restrictions.

Through this passage of artwork, we aim to uncover the source of questions which have personally affected me and my psyche as well as other women, like: why are women viewed as Eve or Lilith's reflections that keep men from worshipping or were we made solely to serve as temptresses who stain the divine purity?

Chapter 1: The Symbol of Motherhood and Women's Bodies in Religion

Women's biological needs and behaviours are sexualized in religion, which leads to them being labelled sinful and impure. From the story of Adam and Eve to Samson and Delilah, women are portrayed as temptresses designed to lead men astray from righteousness and God. Using the symbol of motherhood and Christianity, we can examine this perspective in further detail.

Theologians who write on the symbol of motherhood are more interested in and at ease with acknowledging our dependency on the all-encompassing provision that Christians refer to as God than with our first total reliance on an actual woman for birth, care, and food — for life itself. In her book *A Complex Delight: The Secularization of the Breast* (1350-1750), Margaret Miles discusses a passage attributed to Augustine (c. 356-430) that reads: "Neither my mother nor my nurses filled their own breasts with milk; it was you [God] who, through them, gave me the food of my infancy" (Miles, *A Complex Delight*, 1350-1750, p. 10). The author emphasises how, when discussing the actual experience of maternity, subsequently theologians focus on transcending from the actual experience in order to call attention to the "something else." By moving too quickly to the symbolic, they minimise the bodily experiences that gave the symbol its power.

Women have been and continue to be objectified as the means by which God creates, cares for, and facilitates the subsequent creations. Theologians are willing to admit that the helplessness of the infant is the lifelong human condition, but instead of acknowledging the reality of our birth and infancy, they are hastily jumping to the symbolic interpretation, which holds that God is nourishing and caring for the child. This drive to objectify women has played a significant role to the issue of how nursing mothers are represented and portrayed in art and iconography. For example, breastfeeding is not regarded as a completely natural act because the women portrayed are viewed as a symbol.

To further explore this subject we should take a look into the iconography of The Virgin Madonna and The Child in which The Madonna is frequently seen nursing the child. As the mother figure of the Virgin Mary gained more adoration, artwork and iconography depicting the Nursing Madonna grew in popularity around the 13th century. These were smaller paintings for devotional purposes and frequently featured Mary posing in humility while donning ordinary clothes and sitting on the ground with her head bowed. Despite the fact

that this scene became well-known, the question of how to depict Mary's bare breasts for Christ to suckle while avoiding even the tiniest suggestion of lust, arose.



Figure 1. *Madonna and the Child*



Figure 2. *Madonna del latte*

This was the period when artists were becoming increasingly adept at accurately representing objects through more realistic volume and proportions. These changes put the decorum surrounding images to the test. One way to deal with this issue was to depict Mary's breasts in an erratic, occasionally unrecognisable way. These common depictions of Mary breastfeeding frequently included the bare breast separated from the body, occasionally moving to the level of the collarbone, and frequently deformed in shape to be purposefully ambiguous in terms of anatomical accuracy. In images like figure 1 and figure 2: *Madonna and the Child* (1370s), *Madonna del latte* (1324-25), Mary's nursing breast is shown in an unnaturally high position, close to her shoulder .

The goal of these images was to communicate the universal mothering virtues of the Virgin Mary without any possible suggestion of nudity or eroticism. However, the standards set for this type of iconography soon came to an end. As the demand for naturalism in painting increased, irregular depictions of Mary came to be seen as incorrect and possibly unprofessional. Other approaches of depicting The Holy Mother were thought upon by artists. Less popular were the Madonna of Humility paintings. Instead, the Nursing Virgin was often shown on a throne elevated above the ground, surrounded by angels and

seraphs, as in Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Madonna and the Child*(1490). In contrast to the earlier, smaller, conventional representations, these paintings were larger and intended to be revered in public. The objective was to transform Mary into a more aristocratic figure, an idealistic Queen of Heaven, possibly the product of a sacred vision, rendering her less open to the direct, intimate gaze of the viewer.



Figure 3. *Madonna in Glory with Saints*

Images of the Nursing Mary were discouraged by the church for reasons of decency in the later 16th century, following the Council of Trent (1545–1563). Even though the Nursing Virgin was never represented entirely exposed, the implied sexual connotation ran afoul of these newly stricter definitions of decency, and as a result, the production of these paintings quickly declined once the church forbade this type of iconography.



Figure 4. *Mary Magdalene in Penitance with Crucifix*

A similar topic to that of the Nursing Madonna bare breasts would be the representation of Saint Mary Magdalene in art and the connotation of her often nakedness. St. Mary Magdalene was one of the women who stood by the cross (John 19:25) and later discovered the empty tomb (John 20:1). She is traditionally known as the penitent prostitute whom Jesus forgave (Luke 7:35-50). Commonly, St. Mary Magdalene is depicted as a patron saint -young, attractive, wearing expensive jewellery, rich garments and clutching a box of ointment, or as a penitent -solitary or with angels, hiding in a cave and reading in front of a skull and/or cross. The history of penitence is clearly seen in figure 4, *St. Mary Magdalene in Penitence with the Crucifix* (1590). In an effort to hide her beauty, El Greco shortens her hair and covers her breasts with a garment that she clasps with her left hand. She is deep in meditation by looking at the skull and clearly in a state of prayer. The Great Babylon, the mother of all harlots (Revelation 17:5), is connected to her by the purple tint of her garment.

The painting in picture 6, *The Penitent Magdalene* (1654) is quite similar to figure 5, *Mary Magdalene with Angel* (1528-88). The artists paint Magdalene as a lustful pagan posed in a lascivious twisted manner. She rests the book on the crucifix as she leans against it, her hair barely covering her bare skin. The colours of the untamed sea are still present in the blue garments. The only part of Magdalene's body that is lighted by the rays of celestial light that punctuate the clouds is her chest, which are unquestionably the painting's main focal point. The Magdalene paintings by Veronese and Carreno are sensual and seductive despite the

subject matter of private penance. Spiritual redemption and overt sensuality felt like appealing themes for artists to explore. But why did this seem so alluring?

Icon of the Renaissance propaganda against prostitution, example of sinner who repented or even an emblem of hope for a second chance, Magdalene was portrayed as the epitome of unrestrained female sexuality: a voluptuous temptress revealing her gleaming skin that seduced so many men. Overall, there is a strong sense of censorship when it comes to the portrayal of revered women in Christianity. Being large visual pieces meant for public viewing for a lot of the time, this would have perpetuated the image of what a woman is supposed to be, both to men and women, and reinforce the church's own stance on matters pertaining to women.



Figure 5. *Mary Magdalene with Angel*



Figure 6. *The Penitent Mary Magdalene*

Chapter 2: The Virgin and the Unicorn

Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honour God with your bodies.

(First Corinthians 6:18–20)

The culture of virginity is one of the most prevalent issues that we women face from a very young age. In comparison to non-virgins, virgins are portrayed as more cherished or valued. Just like a natural aphrodisiac, there is something about virgins that seems to emanate desirability. The ones who are born with vaginas are the major targets of patriarchal oppression, and the idea of purity is wholly founded on guilt, shame, and misrepresentation. Religion emphasises the value of remaining clean, saying that having sex makes one impure by nature but after marriage, becomes strangely sacred. Since we were young girls, we have been told that our hymens are the most valuable possessions we own as women. This myth is even circulated about women who are either born without hymens or who have lost them as a result of sports or other physical activities. Many women are put in uncomfortable positions because of this issue, and many of them desire or are pressured by families to seek hymenoplasty.

This chapter's major focus will be a collection of seven medieval tapestries that tell a fascinating tale about a wild unicorn and a virgin maiden. For a deeper understanding of this culture, this study will examine the sexualization of chastity and look into the connection between religion and virginity.

An extensive collection of unicorn artefacts from Europe and the Middle East, dating from the twentieth to the seventeenth century, were on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art: *Search of the Unicorn* (2013) exhibition in celebration of the institution's 75th anniversary. *The Unicorn Tapestries* (1495–1505) were as described: " the finest manifestation of a subject widely addressed across cultures, and in both European art and science, from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance". (Freeman, 1976)

A thorough analysis used to decipher the complicated symbols of the tapestries is given by Margaret Freeman in the *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* (1976). Whilst in the process of translating these images they can be interpreted as an allegory of Christ, who was first pursued, then killed, and reborn. Freeman writes of the final panel (Figure 7): "the unicorn may be interpreted as the risen Christ in the midst of a Paradise Garden".

Richard Preston in his essay for "*The New Yorker*" titled *Capturing the Unicorn* (2005), supports Freeman's theory that the unicorn imagery represents Christ as a symbol, but adds the romantic yet tragic thought that the unicorn is doomed by its blind love for the maiden. He cites literary works like Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess* (1368–1372) and Gottfried von Strausburg's *Tristan and Isolde* (1210), as instances of these allegorical hunts.

The second and sixth panels of the tapestries are without a doubt the ones that provide the most unmistakable emblems for the relationship between the unicorn and divinity. The unicorn itself can be seen for the first time in the second tapestry (Figure 8).

He is "very handsome—from the tip of his spiral horn to his curly beard and elegantly plumed tail," (Freeman, 1976, p. 20). The hunting group is standing and conversing all



Figure 8. *The Unicorn Tapestries, 2nd panel*



Figure 7. *The Unicorn Tapestries, 6th panel*

around the beast as they watch their quarry dip his purifying horn into the water flowing from a fountain into a stream. The magical abilities of the horn that are in direct connection to the miracles of Messiah, are talked about in the Greek bestiary *The Lore of the Unicorn* (1988), which according to Odell Shepard, claims that:

when the animals
assemble at the evening

beside the great water to drink they find that a serpent has left its venom floating upon the surface [...] They see or smell this venom and dare not drink but to wait for the unicorn. At last, he comes, steps into the water, makes the sign of the cross over it with his horn and thereby renders the poison harmless.

(Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn*, 1988, p. 72)

The sixth tapestry (Figure 8) is an image divided in two scenes, with the first scene taking place in the upper left corner where the unicorn is slain and the second scene showing the dead unicorn being transported out of the woodland on a horse's back. When examined closely, the entire tapestry appears to depict the Crucifixion scene. The opening act of the work, in which the hunters kill the beast by piercing it in the chest with lances, and the second act, in which the unicorn is taken to the castle, are all strong allusions to The Descent from the Cross. The motifs that give this tapestry its meaning include not only the important background plants that are conventionally connected with the Crown of Thorns, but even the Christ-like wound that is evident on the unicorn's chest area. Another important detail that could be interpreted in this discussion is the importance and meaning of the group that greets the unicorn at the castle. The rosary in the hand of the lady and three other women, followed by a man, had many theologians believe that this group is a symbolic Deposition of the grieving Virgin Mary, John the Baptist and the Holy Women.

The tactic used by hunters is a detail that raises numerous questions about the relationship between women and religion. In the 5th tapestry (Figure 9), a virgin maiden acted as a lure to expose and subdue the unicorn so that the hunters could claim its horn, and its love for her brought the unicorn's doom. But what meaning exactly does a virgin maiden cover in this narrative?

The unicorn's preference for virgin women is one of its most iconic and well-known characteristics. The unicorn was shown as either fierce and untameable in *The Unicorn Tapestries* (1495–1505), and it was claimed that only a virgin girl is allowed to get close to them—



Figure 7. *The Unicorn Tapestries*, 5th panel

the creature even lets the woman touch his horn. In fact, this gesture of caressing the horn, might represent the act of love.

In *The Horn and The Relic* (Michael, 2012), the virgin offers the unicorn her breasts and "the animal begins to suck the breasts of the maiden and to conduct himself familiarly with her". In the version of Richard de Fournival in the "Bestiaire d'Amour" (McCulloch, Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries, 1960) by proposing a pheromone bond between the virgin and the unicorn, he emphasises the sexual physicality of the hunt. It is the virgin's distinct perfume that draws the unicorn to her lap. The precise meaning of "virginity" varies greatly. In some depictions, the definition is strictly physical, with varied degrees of rigour; in other works, unicorns are shown to have a soft spot for young girls and women in general, with the beast being drawn to those who have a "pure heart."

Due to a lack of sex education, women are being raised to accept that their value is based on a physical characteristic about which they are uninformed. It was thought that waiting until marriage would assure you love, success, and mutual respect. The virginity myth and purity culture are to blame for creating a toxic narrative that has little to do with reality, if anything at all. Because of their greater vulnerability than men, women are once again not treated equally with them.

Chapter 3: About Women and Religion in Contemporary Art



Figure 8. DC: *semiramis*

The human figure has been a focal point in art when envisioning transformations in cultural and societal attitudes, economic and political percept, and religious doctrines. The majority of world civilisations and religions are based on a patriarchal system, which causes male body representations to portray attitudes of power and strenght while female body portrayals project softer and more different traits. The role of women in religion and religious

art is being examined in new ways by contemporary feminist groups, including historians, theologians, artists and more recently critics, and curators. These women began investigating and analysing the iconography of certain female figures, whether deities, famous women from history, or mythical creatures. Examining various female representations throughout a religion's history provides the chance to observe how religion affects and moulds cultural or societal notions of women as well as to evaluate differences in artistic approaches.

The majority of female artists take a very personal approach to their work in order to address the unjust discrepancy between men and women and deal with women's vulnerability in society. Some of them attempt to construct a parallel universe that exists outside of their own, where women reign and patriarchy is rejected. The artist Tai Shani is the most relevant to this manner of approaching art. She is a British artist who explores lost histories and stories, primarily those involving women, through performance, cinema, photography, sculptural installations, and experimental texts. In order to analyse current gender assumptions and construct a different history, Shani frequently builds a physical and psychological space in her work. She is interested in the vulnerability that women face in society and frequently draws inspiration for her hybrid-like characters inspired from feminist narratives, science fiction and pop cultural mythologies.

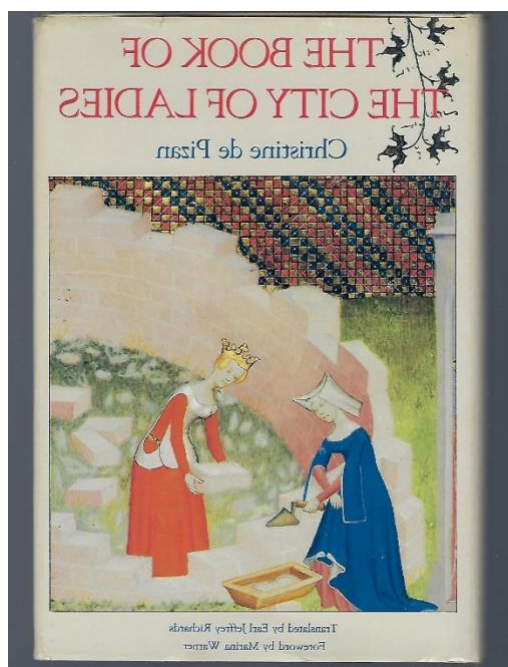


Figure 9. *The Book of the City of Ladies*

'Womanhood' is a troubled concept presented in the world of her work especially *DC: Semiramis* (Figure 10). Her first public solo exhibition, *Dark Continent*, a four-year in the making project, named after Freud's description of female sexuality, brings together videos, prints, and sculptural works at the Tetley in Leeds.

The Book of The City of Ladies (1405) by Christine de Pizan, a French Renaissance author, served as the model for Shani's *DC: Semiramis* (2018). The book (Figure 11) includes discussions between Christine de Pizan and the three female Virtues—reason, rectitude, and justice, where they are sent to help her lay the city's foundation and chose the women who will live there. The goal of

writing this book was to combat the idea that women were an inferior species. Pizan envisioned this piece as a metaphorical city that would shelter the biographies of historically

significant women while defending them against misogynistic aggression. The piece is a pioneering illustration of a feminist strategy to combat the patriarchal world, a genre that honours the lives of historical and mythical figures.

Shani may not accept the etymology of the word "woman," but her characters are fiercely proud of their genitalia. But because being referred to as a "woman" is associated with men through the absence of the other word ("men"), specifically with the absence of male genitalia, the characters in Shani's world are no longer women by terminology. In Shani's world, even history and science are in need of a reorganisation. Therefore, assigning historical significance to imaginary women—the teenager, the siren, the vampire—was a radical concept.



Figure 10. *Azione Sentimentale*

Gina Pane's iconic performances and body of work, like Shani's universe of women, demonstrate major changes in feminist contemporary art. Pane uses her body in various self-harming acts to express her outrage at the misery and pain endured by women and other minorities. The artist wants to evoke the experience of being the target of aggression by using violence and subjecting herself to agony. One of Gina Pane's best-known performances is *Azione Sentimentale* (1973), performance held at Millan's Galleria Diagramma. Pane was offering and taking back from a white rose bouquet that was smeared with her blood while the crowd was exclusively composed of women. The artist also removed the thorns from the roses, piercing her arms with them in a straight row, and using

a razor to cut the palm of her hand or the area just above her eyebrows. Two voices read letters between mothers-daughters, friends and lovers during the performance.

Pane's performances were carried out with an emphasis on the visual language of ritualistic customs. She used traditions to develop her own modern interpretations on the interrelationship between the spiritual and the personal. Through the letters that were being read aloud, Pane intended to make a statement on the subliminal and occasionally overt sexuality present in many religious rituals.

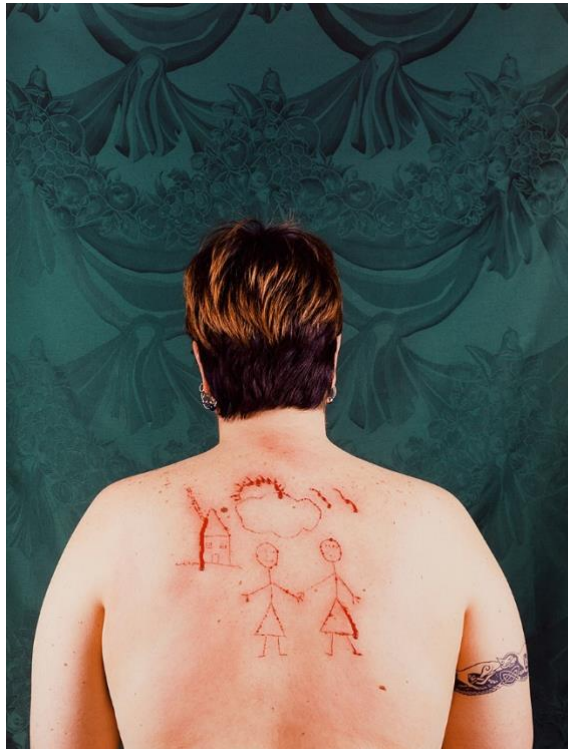


Figure 11. *Self-Portrait/Cutting*

The artist sought to reveal the violence perpetrated against women in patriarchal cultures or to externalise the self-hatred that women are compelled to internalise in such cultures through her practice. Gina Pane was influenced in her performance by Catherine Opie, notably her 1993 work *Self-Portrait/Cutting*. This work brings forward the violence and pain that are the cost of a relationship between two women, in a homophobic and aggressive society. A modern representation of the violence against two women in love is depicted in the carving on Opie's back (Figure 13).

There are numerous religious allusions in Gina Pane's artistic masochism. In addition to her ritualistic performances, the artist also injures her body to preserve her own identity, much like Christ did when he died on the cross for his faith. The artist became interested in sculpture and photography based on the iconography of St. Francis, St. Lawrence, and St.

Sebastian as a result of the close connection she made between her art and religion. This cry of the female body became a comparison to the martyrdom of these saints.

Conclusion

The ideas and works presented in this essay were investigated in order to analyse and better comprehend the importance of women's identity in the modern world and how they interpret their struggle in contemporary art.

From a broad and historical perspective, shown in the first and second chapter, there are indeed large connotations and subvert messages about women in context to Christianity. For instance, whilst Mary Magdalene is a highly censored figure in Christianity, depictions of her indicate the dilemma male artists have when confronted with her own sexual background. The juxtaposition between religious purity, yet a figure of religiosity emerging from what is perceived to be immoral, poses an awkward challenge to those who cannot accept it, or those who only see her background. The same dilemma still exists today when it comes to the sexualisation of women and impacts the position of women in Christianity. The unfair discrimination of women based on their background and the hypocrisy and underhandedness of those in positions of religious authority reflect this long-time dilemma, and consequently, the view of women in an uncertain and sexualised light.

The control the male-dominated church has had on the image of women is one which treats them as an object, and even in some cases, inhuman. When depictions deform women's bodies to suit their agenda, reinforce the role of women as either devilish sources of lust or only caregivers, and treat women as only as symbols, this only harms the view of women, both in their own eyes and the perspective of others, and detracts from their true identity. It suggests that there is a strict place where women belong and contorts what should be natural to a woman on a moral level.

The impact of this viewpoint has significant effects on women, how they are perceived, and therefore, their daily lives as well. Historically, women were scapegoated and would have to suffer for causing sin to happen rather than men who lacked control. Large and popular iconographies would only act to solidify how women were allowed to see themselves as, and in many religions today, this standpoint still remains. It can even be argued that many of the image problems women face today can find its origin in the past, particularly due to the authority of the church. Because of the focus of what women are in terms of their sexual nature, both in the past and now, women struggle to come to terms with their own image and nature. Patriarchal structures like the church, both in the past and now, were the original progenitors of the focus on the female body and their role in society, and continue to

be so today. Whilst the same archaic and patriarchal structure of the church may no longer be as strong today, women still deal with the consequences manifested in other forms today.

With the modern slant in mind, women of today are still affected by issues rooted in religion. When there are extreme displays of self-harm for the sake of women's voices, and as a protest to the status-quo, it can be interpreted that issues caused by religion still exist, but also, there is a reassuring emergence of art which counters the idea of what a woman should be in accordance to religion. Again, the church, which frequently promotes these harmful ideas, shames women for their bodies. It goes without saying that religious ideas, traditions, and practises can—and frequently do—be used to uphold, support, and justify prejudice against women, girls, and other minorities. The point is not that religion is harmful to women and secularism is beneficial to them; rather, this entire prejudice should go through a process of recognising how religion should not be a hindrance while talking feminism but rather an influential force that supports equality.

Their response in itself displays how the continuation of a mindset dated in the early years of Christianity still weighs heavily on women today. The fact that these women went so far as to self-harm for the love of art and to publicly express their suffering in the hopes of playing a part in enabling women to be more content and safe, is testament to how significant religious impositions have undoubtedly impacted women in our era.

Women should actively participate in this issue not only targeted and discussed about. Our viewpoints, knowledge, and experiences ought to be heard and considered. Less discrimination and harassment might result from improving the possibilities and statuses for women. Additionally, we must interact with individuals who promote, defend, and normalise injustice and inequality. Artists have always played a significant role and affected social transformation. Globally, gender diversity is being promoted more and more through the use of art and other creative endeavours. Through art, the issues we are fighting for can be brought to the public's attention, fresh experiences and insights can be shared, and people can become more sympathetic to the cause.

“My illustrious lordship, I'll show you what a woman can do!” (Gentileschi, A. 1593 - 1653)

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Author's Declaration:

I declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own work.