



Reconsidering Titus Andronicus through Slavoj Žižek's Theory of Violence

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ABSTRACT

Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* is often criticized for its spectacle of physical brutality, yet this very focus on subjective violence can obscure the deeper, more insidious forms of coercion that structure the play's world. This study mobilizes Slavoj Žižek's tripartite model of violence from *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*—subjective, systemic, and symbolic—to argue that the true horror of the play lies not in its bloodshed, but in the invisible ideological machinery of Rome. Moving beyond prior scholarship, which has vividly catalogued the play's graphic acts, this paper demonstrates how systemic violence (embedded in law and political institutions) and symbolic violence (inherent in language and ritual) operate to produce the conditions for the play's notorious atrocities. Ultimately, a Žižekian reading reveals that the collapse of the Roman order is not a descent into chaos, but the logical culmination of the objective violence upon which its civilization was founded.

Keywords: Subjective Violence; Systemic Violence; Symbolic Violence; Ideology; Shakespeare; *Titus Andronicus*; Slavoj Žižek.

1. Introduction

According to Oxford English Dictionary, "Violence" is the use of physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something. Generally and based on this dictionary meaning, we only focus on physical power of oppressor imposed on oppressed and as a matter of fact the other forms of violence are overlooked in the society due to their invisibility. Many philosophers, from Hannah Arendt to Walter Benjamin have discussed the narrow association of violence with physical harm. Hannah Arendt refers to direct relationship between power and violence. In her book under the title of *On Violence*, she directly states that violence starts as the power is faded. She argues that in 20th century the violence and power differ from each other. She believes that violence happens when people suffer from lack of power and this point of view is completely different from ordinary people's. She states that:

Politically speaking, it is insufficient to say that power

and violence are not the same. Power and violence are opposites, where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent. Violence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power's disappearance. This implies that it is not correct to think of the opposite of violence as nonviolence, to speak of non-violent power is actually redundant. Violence can destroy power, it is utterly incapable of creating it. (Arendt 56)

Whereas Hannah Arendt distinguishes violence from power, treating it as a process that emerges when legitimacy fails, Walter Benjamin goes deeper into the structure that legitimizes violence in the first place. For him, violence is not merely an interruption of order but the very means through which order is established and preserved. In the final parts of "Critique of Violence", Walter Benjamin differentiates between two opposing kinds of violence named mythical and divine. He writes, "If mythical violence is law-making, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them. If the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood." (Benjamin 297–298).

Slavoj Žižek takes Benjamin's idea one step beyond. He suggests that violence is not only present in the law or in visible acts like war and crime, but also in the everyday systems and language that shape our daily lives. In *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (2008), Žižek distinguishes between subjective and objective violence. While subjective violence refers to direct and visible acts, objective violence functions invisibly as part of the normal order of society. Žižek further divides objective violence into systemic violence, produced by political and economic structures, and symbolic violence, enacted through language, ideology, and meaning-making processes.

William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, generally considered as his earliest tragedy is a play of relentless violence, political decay, and moral collapse. Written between 1592 and 1594, during a period when London theatres were repeatedly closed due to the plague, it reflects a society both fascinated and horrified by spectacle and death.

The play mainly focuses on Roman general Titus, who returns to Rome after defeating the Goths and now plans to take revenge that finally destroys both his family and the empire itself.

As Anna Benella mentions *Titus Andronicus* "is theatre of unimaginable horrors and at the same time replete with refined classical allusions," drawing heavily on Ovid, Seneca, Virgil and Livy. Beneath its scenes of dismemberment, rape, and cannibalism, the play investigates the relationship between violence, justice, and spectacle in Elizabethan culture. Public executions was part of daily life in Shakespeare's London, and audiences actually observed the sight of blood and cruelty on stage as a mirror of their own society.

Titus Andronicus also belongs to the genre of revenge tragedy, in which two tribes kill each other to be loyal to their customs and traditions. The horror of the play is not only limited to physical mutilations but in the collapse of the Roman ideal of reason and order into barbaric passion and madness.

In this study, the researcher attempts to investigate different types of violence in *Titus Andronicus* through the philosophical framework of Slavoj Žižek, whose theory reveals the hidden mechanisms that preserves social and ideological order. Except focusing solely on the visible scenes of murder, mutilation, and revenge that dominate within the play, this study examines how Shakespeare exposes deeper layers of violence—those embedded within the language, law, and moral codes of Roman society. By applying Žižek's two major models of subjective and objective violence, the research seeks to uncover how acts of cruelty in the play are not isolated or accidental but reflections of a broader ideological structure. Ultimately, this approach demonstrates that the true horror of *Titus Andronicus* lies not only in its bloodshed but in its revelation of how civilization itself depends upon invisible systems of coercion and control.

2. Literature Review

Most of the studies on *Titus Andronicus* are concerned with the play's physical and spectacular violence, yet they tend to overlook the deeper ideological structures that underlie these acts.

While critics have extensively analyzed bodily mutilation, taking revenge, and gendered brutality, few have approached the play through a theoretical framework—such as Žižek's three models of subjective, objective, and symbolic violence—that can illuminate the hidden mechanisms sustaining the violence made by Roman authority.

Cinzia Russo's thesis *The Representation of Death in Titus Andronicus* (2011) rejects the common view of the play as merely a "theatre of horrors," and believes that having extreme violence and consecutive deaths perform essential psychological, cultural, and structural functions. Relying on classical models such as Ovid's metamorphosis and Seneca's tragic excess, Russo shows how Shakespeare uses bodily mutilation, misogynistic violence, and ritualized death to expose the collapse of Roman moral order and the emotional disintegration of its characters.

Molly Easo Smith in "Spectacles of Torment in *Titus Andronicus*" (1996), argues that the play's brutality and violence must be understood based on cultural context of early modern public punishments and theatrical display. Smith highlights that Shakespeare stages violence as a form of public spectacle that blurs the boundaries between entertainment, punishment, and political authority. Her research demonstrates that acts of mutilation and execution in the play do not merely serve sensational purposes but reproduce the type of brutality common in the Elizabethan era.

Paula Starr Sherrin in his essay titled "Bewhored" and "Broken": Gendered Experiences of Trauma in *Titus Andronicus and the Changeling*. In this thesis, Lavinia's suffering as a distinctly gendered form of trauma in which physical violation is inseparable from symbolic erasure. The study argues that the way that the men and women experience trauma is completely different. While Lavinia's loss of speech and agency exemplifies how women's bodies become sites of inscription for social, moral, and patriarchal meanings, male characters experience trauma mainly through the disruption of honor, authority, or political identity.

Cyril Belvis, in his article "Violent Language and Its Female Site in *Titus Andronicus*" (2011), argues that violence in the play is not merely limited to physical brutality but is also deeply embedded in its language. He shows that women—especially Lavinia—become the primary targets of this linguistic violence, as the male characters use derogatory labels, symbolic silencing, and verbal definitions to control how female bodies are perceived.

Francesca T. Royster's article "White-Limed Walls: Whiteness and Gothic Extremism in *Titus Andronicus*" (2000) argues that violence in the play is not just limited to brutal actions but it encompasses racial and ideological framework. Royster explains that the Romans construct an ideal of "whiteness" associated with purity, order, and civilization, while characters such as Tamora are positioned as racial and cultural "others."

In her article "*Titus Andronicus* and the Wicked Streets of Rome," Lisa Hopkins explains that Rome is not just a neutral setting for the events of the play but an active force that shapes the violence. Shakespeare deliberately breaks down the boundary between "inside" and "outside"—such as home versus street, private versus public, or safety versus danger. Acts of violence and revenge that should remain private are instead exposed in public spaces, turning the streets of Rome into sites of spectacle and brutality. Because the city itself is corrupt, its streets does not have law or order but become places where violence is vivid and normal. The influence of this violence is also obvious on characters like Titus and "wicked streets of Rome" symbolize the moral and social collapse of Roman society, where the line between justice and revenge disappears.

3. Žižek's Threefold Model of Violence

In *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (2008), Slavoj Žižek considers the concept of violence beyond its visible forms. He distinguishes between subjective violence, which refers to visible and immediate acts such as murder, riots, and war, and objective violence, which operates invisibly as part of the normal state of things. Objective violence, according to Žižek, has two facets: symbolic violence, which is embedded in language, forms, and our "universe of meaning and systemic violence which refers to the often-catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems. Žižek argues that an exclusive focus on subjective violence

obscures these deeper forms of violence, allowing ideological and structural forces to remain unexamined.

3.1. Subjective Violence in *Titus Andronicus*:

Žižek defines subjective violence as direct, visible aggression performed by identifiable individuals. It is the form of violence that “erupts as an event,” shocking and disrupting the apparent normality of everyday life (Žižek 9).

Harry Van der Linden in his essay “On the Violence of Systemic Violence: A Critique of Slavoj Žižek,” clarifies Žižek’s subjective violence as the “most basic form involves that its agents generate physical force through their own body (stabbing, hitting, etc.), or an immediate extension of their bodies (shooting), and this physical force then strikes the victim.” In other words, one’s violence against someone in which the subject is involved directly is considered as the fundamental violence. This involvement is through the physical body doing actions such as beating, stabbing or killing one using gun. The subject’s involvement is labeled as subjective violence by Žižek.

In *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare expertly infuses the play with scenes of brutal, visible violence that embody this category. The opening act introduces bloodshed as a ritualized spectacle: In the first act when Titus has returned from the war, we can see Titus is ready to take revenge from Tamora’s son and considers it as a ritual. This scene is full of subjective violence as we can see how Lucius orders the commanders to cut Alarbus’s body and put it in the fire.

See, lord and father, how we have performed
Our Roman rites. Alarbus’ limbs are lopped,
And entrails feed the sacrificing fire,
Whose smoke like incense doth perfume the sky.
Remaineth naught but to inter our brethren,
And with loud larums welcome them to Rome.

This quotation explains how violence in *Titus Andronicus* is ritualized and justified within Roman culture. *Titus Andronicus* considers killing of Alarbus as “Roman rites” and describes the burning body as a sacred offering. Through this dialogue, Shakespeare uses this moment to show how Roman society normalizes violence through tradition and spectacle, revealing a corrupted city at the very beginning of the play.

3.1.1. Domestic Brutality: The Murder of Mutius

Soon after, violence enters the domestic sphere when Titus kills his own son Mutius for defending Lavinia’s defiance. Lavinia is surprised because instead of Saturninus, Bassianus wants to marry her. Titus attempts to make a marriage alliance between Saturninus and Lavinia, but is thwarted by Bassianus and his own sons on the grounds of a prior contract with Bassianus himself. Titus kills his own son Mutius as the latter tries to prevent his father from exchanging Saturninus for Bassianus. This is the play’s first onstage death and it is committed by a Roman upon his own son. Until now, all of the deaths have resulted from the conflict between Romans and Goths. Now Titus marks himself as equivalent to the Goths who have killed so many of his other sons, erasing the boundaries between civic Roman identity and the Gothic barbarian enemy. (Innes 14)

Treason, my lord. Lavinia is surprised.
SATURNINUS: Surprised? By whom?
BASSIANUS: By him that justly may
Bear his betrothed from all the world away.
MUTIUS: Brothers, help to convey her hence away,
And with my sword I’ll keep this door safe
Titus to Saturninus: Follow, my lord, and I’ll soon bring her back.
Mutius: My lord, you pass not here
Titus: What, villain boy, barr’st me my way in Rome?

He stabs Mutius.

Mutius: Help, Lucius, help!

Mutius dies.

This scene is a crucial turning point in *Titus Andronicus*, as violence shifts from the public and political setting into the domestic and familial space. Titus's killing of his own son Mutius represents the first onstage Roman-on-Roman murder, dissolving the distinction between civilized Roman authority and barbaric Gothic violence. By framing Mutius's resistance as "insubordination," Titus equates personal obedience with political loyalty, revealing how Roman law and paternal power have become indistinguishable.

3.1.2. In the Forest: The Rape and Mutilation of Lavinia

The infamous forest scene shows the most extreme form of subjective violence—the rape and mutilation of Lavinia by Chiron and Demetrius. We are directed to observe the body with all its violations, both seen and unseen: "Enter. . . Lavinia, her hands cut off, and her tongue cut out, and ravish'd." Instead Lavinia finds a new tongue to replace the one she has lost when her father directs her: "Bear thou my hand, sweet wench, between thy teeth."

3.1.3 The Cannibalistic Feast in *Titus Andronicus*

In the final scene of *Titus Andronicus*, the title character presents the Gothic queen Tamora with a pie in which he has baked her sons' whereabouts, Titus reveals his plot in the gloating tones of the renaissance revenger:

Titus:

Why, there they are, both bakèd in this pie,

Whereof their mother daintily hath fed,

Eating the flesh that she herself hath bred.

'Tis true, 'tis true! Witness my knife's sharp point

In the space of twenty lines occur Titus's killing of his daughter Lavinia, the twin revelations quoted above, Titus's murder of Tamora, the emperor Saturnissu's killing of Titus, and the retaliatory stabbing of Saturnius by Titus's son Lucius. Tamora has only a few seconds of horror, and no time for anguished speech, before Titus kills her. (Goldstein 32)

As can be observed, this scene is one of the most controversial moments in the play, portraying a tangible and explicit form of violence among the brutal characters. The act of baking the dead bodies and serving them to their mother is impossible for any audience to overlook. *Titus Andronicus* appears fully satisfied, believing that since these sons were raised by their mother, she therefore deserves to witness such a horrific outcome.

From Žižek's point of view, cannibalism is one of the best example of subjective violence that reminds us the existence of deeper sides of violence. In other words, Behind Titus's revenge lies a long history related to systemic and symbolic violence including Rome's discriminatory practices, Saturninus's corrupt rule, and the social marginalization of the Goths.

On the other hand this scene shows how civilization is fragile. Eating – which is usually a habit of life and peace – is changed into measurement of revenge. Shakespeare vividly changes an ordinary party to a horrible festival. The food is a sign of moral corruption and dining table is a place in which the people are killed. This scene also reminds us that the body is an instrument for taking revenge because mutation of the hands, heads and finally eating the parts of the body takes place. In a world that everything is based on revenge, body is valueless and is just an instrument. Žižek believes that in a world in which violence is the main language of people, the society and the authorities finally destroy themselves. So cannibalism is not horrible due to its visceral nature, but it shows that Rome is being destroyed from inside.

While the play is full of shocking scenes of physical violence such as murders, rapes and mutilations, Žižek refers to the other types of violence which are invisible but more intense. In Shakespeare's Rome, violence is not considered as an individual action but a symptom of a political and ideological system already saturated with coercion. The rituals, laws, and hierarchies that

shape Roman identity operate as silent mechanisms of domination. Thus, in order to understand why subjective violence becomes so ubiquitous throughout the play, it is necessary to examine the layer of objective violence that makes Roman society and normalizes the oppression upon which it stands.

3.2 Objective Violence in *Titus Andronicus*

Drahoš summarizes Žižek's objective violence to demonstrate the violence between the suppressor and the suppressed: "Objective violence describes the inherent violence of a system, not only the threat of physical violence but also "the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation." (17)

To highlight the invisibility of objective violence in comparison to subjective one, Žižek successfully notices warnings about duplicity of subjective violence by questioning its visibility: "Is there not something suspicious, indeed symptomatic, about the focus on subjective—that violence which is enacted by social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, fanatical crowds?" (Violence 10) Then he answers this question by asking a rhetorical question: Doesn't it desperately try to distract our attention from the true locus of trouble, by obliteration from view other forms of violence and thus actively participating in them? " (Violence 11) By prominently presenting subjective violence, attention is diverted away from the deeper causes behind it.

To understand subjective and objective violence one should regard two different angles since the former is perceived against the tranquil level of happenings while the latter is the violence directed against the tranquil state. (Violence 2). Accordingly, Žižek holds that subjective and objective violence are comprehensible from different perspective: "subjective violence is experienced as such against the background of a non-violent zero level. It is seen as a perturbation of the "normal", peaceful state of things". (Violence 2). On the other hand, objective violence is precisely the violence inherent to this "normal" state of things. Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent. " (Violence 2) "Non-violent zero level" is used to distinguish subjective and objective violence. If one action disturbs this level which sounds ordinary quiet state, it is subjective violence. Barely does the objective violence disrupt the zero level and due to the fact that it maintains the zero level it to mirror a violent action subjective rather objective.

3.2.1 Saturninus's Instrumentalization of Lavinia

A central instance of Žižek's objective violence in *Titus Andronicus* appears in the ways Emperor Saturninus uses Lavinia as a political instrument. From the moment Titus nominates him as emperor, Saturninus treats Lavinia's body and marriage not as matters of affection or familial honor, but as tools for consolidating power. His sudden declaration that he will take Lavinia as his empress—"A goodly lady, trust me; of the hue / That I would choose were I to choose anew" is less a romantic gesture and more an assertion of imperial authority. The emperor reframes Lavinia's body as a symbol of political legitimacy, a visible sign that Titus's loyalty should be rewarded with imperial intimacy.

However, when Saturninus realizes that Lavinia's true love belongs to Bassianus, his behavior shifts instantly from desire and love to punishment. He withdraws his claim not out of respect for Lavinia but out of spite toward Titus, transforming Lavinia into a site where imperial humiliation can be enacted. This is precisely what Žižek calls the invisible coercion injected in systems of domination: Lavinia's suffering is not caused only by the men who attack her later (subjective violence) but also by the patriarchal and imperial structures that position her as an object of exchange.

Scholars like Innes emphasize that Saturninus's abrupt romantic declaration toward Tamora is not an emotional reaction but a calculated political play. As Innes states, "Saturninus' seemingly sudden announcement of intense passion for Tamora seems stage-managed by an astute manipulator... hardly likely to do anything at all without prior calculation" (18). This suggests that his earlier interest in Lavinia was also a form of strategic theater. Saturninus seeks to surround himself with alliances that strengthen his insecure rule, and the choice of empress is a crucial element of that performative authority.

From a Žižekian perspective, this is an example of objective violence obscured as politics. The emperor's personal whims become structural decisions that shape the fate of Lavinia's life. Nothing Saturninus does appears "violent" in a visible, physical sense; however every decision that he makes leaves Lavinia more vulnerable to later brutality. His indifference to her wellbeing—his choice to ignore her distress and instead elevate Tamora—creates the ideological conditions in which the rape and mutilation of Lavinia become possible. This is objective violence at its most potent: the violence of systemic neglect, legitimized by the authority of empire.

Furthermore, Tamora's role intersects with Saturninus's ambitions. She is "the political outsider who rises to the center of Roman power." She needs Saturninus as much as he needs her; their union is a pact of mutual exploitation. Tamora understands immediately upon arriving in Rome that her best chance for revenge lies in merging with imperial power. The speed with which she transitions from prisoner to empress highlights the moral instability of Roman politics—again, an invisible yet devastating form of ideological violence.

The relationship between Saturninus and Tamora shows how objective violence reproduces itself through alliances, marriages, and political theater, not through swords or bloodshed. Their union turns Lavinia from a potential empress into an expendable obstacle. The emperor's willingness to sacrifice Lavinia's dignity for political advantage is not recognized by Roman society as violent—because patriarchal tradition normalizes the use of women as political currency.

Ultimately, Saturninus's treatment of Lavinia demonstrates that the tragedy of *Titus Andronicus* does not begin with the physical assaults in Act 2. It begins in Act 1, with Rome's ideological structures that create a world where Lavinia's body is traded, rejected, instrumentalized, and finally abandoned by the very institutions aimed to protect her. This is the essence of Žižek's objective violence: the harm produced not by visible blows but by the silent operations of power that determine values of the life.

3.2.2 Tamora and the Paradox of Power

Tamora is one of the most complex characters in the play who begins the play as she has lost her status as the queen of the Goths and is prisoned by Titus Andronicus. So at the beginning of the play, she is considered as the victim of the politics and she repeatedly ask Titus to beg her sons.

Stay, Roman brethren! Gracious Conqueror,
Victorious Titus, rue the tears I shed,
A mother's tears in passion for her son:
And if thy sons were ever dear to thee,
O, think my son to be as dear to me!
Sufficeth not that we are brought to Rome.
To beautify thy triumphs and return,
Captive to thee and to thy Roman Yoke,
But must my sons be slaughter'd in the streets,
For valiant doings in their country's cause?

In this scene it is obvious that she is only the victim of Titus's power while as the play goes on, she seriously decides to take revenge and continues violence within the system. Titus on the other hand, does not accept to forgive her son and believes that he cannot act against Rome's rules.

Tamora as a dual subject is victimized in the first part of the play. She loses her son as the authorities believe that they cannot ignore the rules. So it is concluded that this type of violence is invisible because it is originated from within the system. Tamora is now considered as the prisoner of war. She is humiliated and does not have an identity in Rome. On the other hand, in the second part of the play, we observe that Tamora is solely focused on revenge. She is made by the system, even her marriage to Saturninus is not based on love and emotion, it is just for obtaining power. What becomes evident here is that she is reduced to an object in the hands of powerful authorities. Although she is initially manipulated, the Roman authorities ultimately become the ones manipulated by her. It is similar to a vicious circle in which winners and losers are the same.

Tamora is actually a reflection of Rome. She acts as both victim and agent.

3.2.3 Titus as the Manufactured Subject of Roman Ideology

Titus Andronicus is the perfect symbol of Roman authority—an honorable general who has sacrificed “twenty-two sons” for the empire. Shakespeare introduces Titus as a man who is completely shaped by Roman values. His sense of duty, justice, and loyalty is not personal but ideological.

At the beginning of the play, when Titus enters Rome, Bassianus addresses him with honorific titles that underscore his loyalty to the nation.

Romans, make way: the good Andronicus.
Patron of virtue, Rome’s best champion.
Successful in the battles that he fights,
With honour and with fortune is return’d
From where he circumscribed with his sword,
And brought to yoke, the enemies of Rome.
Lavinia also uses some words to call his father

Some lines further, Titus Andronicus also hails to the people in Rome. The way that he greets ordinary people shows his power and it shows that he is not an individual but he belongs to Rome and has special status in Rome.

Hail, Rome, victorious in thy mourning weeds!
Lo, as the bark, that hath discharged her fraught,
Returns with precious jading to the bay
From whence at first she weigh’d her anchorage,
Cometh Andronicus, bound with laurel boughs,
To re-salute his country with his tears,
Tears of true joy for his return to Rome.

Titus does not act as Titus, but as the spirit of Rome. This is why he proudly declares, “Romans, friends, followers, favorers of my right” (1.1.1), positioning himself immediately as a representative of Roman order. Žižek would call Titus “a manufactured subject”: someone whose identity has been produced, shaped, and limited by the ideological system in which he acts.

From the beginning, Titus demonstrates absolute obedience to Roman customs—even when those customs contradict basic morality. The first major indication of this is his refusal to grant mercy to Alarbus, Tamora’s son. Tamora pleads with deep maternal hopelessness:

“O, think my son to be as dear to me
As thine to thee!” (1.1.108–109).

Yet Titus rejects her plea not because he hates Tamora or Goths, but because Roman custom demands sacrifice:

“Religion doth command us to proceed” (1.1.124).

This line is crucial. Titus believes he is acting morally precisely because he is obeying the system. Žižek describes objective violence as the destructive power hidden inside “the normal state of things.” Titus embodies this fact. He commits violence while believing he is performing justice. His actions show how Rome manufactures subjects who harm others in the names of duty and responsibility.

Titus’s moral blindness becomes more visible when he kills his own son, Mutius. When Mutius blocks Titus’s path in defense of Lavinia, Titus responds:

“What, villain boy! Barr’st me my way in Rome?”

He stabs him instantly. The speed of this violence shows that Titus values Roman authority more than his own family. The line “in Rome” signals the ideological power over him—Rome justifies the

killing of his own child. Afterward, when his sons want to bury Mutius in the family tomb, Titus still refuses: "He is no kin of mine".

This is perhaps the most powerful example of how Titus's identity is completely made by Rome. His biological son is less important than his symbolic identity as a Roman general. The subjective violence (killing Mutius) is only the visible expression of the deeper objective violence (Roman ideology shaping Titus's morality).

As the play continues, the system that created Titus begins to turn against him. Saturninus, the new emperor, humiliates Titus by refusing to honor his loyalty and instead publicly favors Tamora. Titus—once Rome's hero—is suddenly treated as a political instrument. This shift reveals what Žižek calls systemic betrayal, when institutions fail the subjects they created. Titus realizes too late that his loyalty was one-sided and his obedience did not protect him or his family.

When Lavinia is raped and mutilated by Chiron and Demetrius, Titus attempts to seek justice through Rome, following legal forms and appealing to authority. But the emperor ridicules and ignores him. Lucius describes Rome perfectly: "No man in Rome is free from Rome's injustice".

This is the moment when Titus undergoes transformation. The loyal Roman soldier becomes the abandoned Roman citizen. The ideological structure that once gave him identity now destroys him. This line "I am the sea... I am not mad; I am bound to revenge" shows his shift from produced subject to broken subject. Rome no longer gives him meaning and authority.

Titus's madness is not merely emotional; it is ideological collapse. Žižek argues that when symbolic order fails, violence becomes the only language that remains. That is exactly what happens to Titus. Cut off from everything such as justice, authority and identity, he becomes a figure who uses violence to reconstruct meaning. Lavinia, now a symbol of Rome's failure, becomes the emotional center of his revenge.

The Killing of Lavinia reveals how deeply Titus has become shaped by Roman ideology even in his madness. When he slits her throat, he justifies it as an act of honor: "Die, die, Lavinia, and thy shame with thee". He kills her not only because of grief, but because Roman culture cannot tolerate dishonor. The system's values still influences on him, even in his darkest acts. Even the time that system is rejected, Titus acts based on its logic.

Finally, the cannibalistic feast shows that Titus has completely internalized objective violence. He stages revenge as a Roman ritual. Cooking Tamora's sons and feeding them to her is not just a random brutal act but is the imitation of the Roman sacrificial logic he followed at the start of the play: "'Tis true, 'tis true! Witness my knife's sharp point." echoes the earlier ritual killing of Alarbus. Shakespeare creates symmetry to show that Titus, even in revenge, is still the production of the Rome. He performs violence in the same ritualistic, ceremonial manner. The manufactured subject finally becomes the agent of Rome's destruction. Rome collapses because it produces subjects who cannot survive outside its ideology.

In the end, Titus is both victim and perpetrator, both loyalist and rebel, both Roman and anti-Roman. He is the perfect example of Žižek's idea that people do not simply perform violence—they are shaped by structures that tell them when violence is acceptable and why it is meaningful. Titus does not choose violence freely; he performs the violence that Rome placed inside him.

Thus, Titus Andronicus becomes not just a story of personal revenge but a tragedy of ideological formation. Titus is a manufactured subject whose identity is formed by the invisible forces of Roman law, honor, and ritual. When those forces collapse, Titus also collapses with them. His final acts, while shocking, are the logical consequences of a system that relies on sacrifice, obedience, and spectacle. Shakespeare's portrayal of Titus thus perfectly illustrates that the most terrifying violence is not what audience observe onstage, but what has been slowly shaping the characters all along.

Lavinia's mode of address—"my lord", "good my lord"—reveals how even the private bond between father and daughter is moderated through the hierarchical language of Roman patriarchy. This linguistic obedience exemplifies Žižek's objective violence: a form of coercion that becomes naturalized within daily speech.:

In peace and Honour live Lord Titus Long ;
 This tomb my tributary tears
 I render, for my brethren's obsequies;
 And at thy feet I kneel, with tears of Joy,
 Shed on the earth, for thy return to Rome:
 O, bless me here with thy victorious hand,
 Whose fortunes Rome's best citizens applaud!

The way that Lavinia calls his father shows that there is no emotional bondage between them and even when they are discussing about Lavinia's marriage, she again respect her father in the same way. Inability of the father and daughter in making a lovely relationship is due to violence governed in the society. Their relationship is more likely to governor and obedient. It shows how the characters have been captured into the prevailing political atmosphere.

After showing Titus's power at the beginning of the play, it is essential to mention that the power itself is one of the reasons of violence. Titus, the same as other people in Rome is under the influence of ideological system, a system which considers violence as a part of natural order. When he enters to Rome, he orders Labarus to be killed, and when he is asked about the reason, he says that it is part of Roman law. He refuses to violate the law under any circumstances, and thus he is a prisoner of the very laws to which he blindly submits. He also observes the laws for his own son. As Mutius defends his sister, Lavinia, regarding her marriage to Bassianus, Titus considers Mutius's action against law, so this time he orders Mutius to be killed and this cycle is continued. Based on the rules of their country, love is not considered as a criteria for marriage, instead keeping power and political intensions are of great importance. Titus does not change what he believes in and he finally kills his daughter to complete this vicious circle. The main reason for killing Lavinia by the father returns to rituals of the society. As Lavinia is raped and cannot speak, the life is ended for her. She is now a sign of dishonor for her family. After being raped, the custom and ritual of the Rome's society do not consider her innocent. So based on some interpretations, it is said that Lavinia herself prefers being killed and when the father asks himself about killing her, she implicitly confirms it. By the end of the play, even the father who was the ruler and powerful authority in Rome is oppressed by the system.

3.3 Systemic Violence

In defining Systemic Violence, Žižek mentions: "Systemic violence is thus something like notorious dark matter of physics, the counterpart to an all- too visible subjective violence." (violence 2). The systemic violence is "the violence inherent in a system: not only direct physical violence, but also the more subtle forms of coercion that sustains relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence." (Violence 9). Žižek repeatedly emphasizes the invisibility of objective violence which leads to its deceitfulness. Moreover, being hidden has kept the objective violence unknown which gives it the chance to act freely.

In Gregg's reading of Titus Andronicus, systemic violence is embedded within the very structures that define Roman civic identity and jurisprudence. The play's opening immediately situates law and violence as co-extensive: Saturninus's appeal to the "patricians" to defend the "justice" of his claim "with arms" exposes a governmental ideology in which legality is inseparable from militarized enforcement. Such moments demonstrate what Žižek calls objective or systemic violence—the subterranean, normative brutality of social structures that appear orderly on the surface but rely on coercive force to sustain themselves (Violence 8). Gregg's emphasis on the saturation of legal discourse in the play shows how Roman institutions convert violence into a civic virtue, making it an intrinsic feature of governance rather than a deviation from it. The result is a political order in which violent practices are legitimized, ritualized, and framed as necessary to maintain Roman stability and honor.

Gregg considers the sacrifice of Alarbus as the clearest instance in which Roman systemic violence becomes theatrically visible. Titus and his sons consider the killing not as murder but as

a religious undertaking—"a sacrifice" demanded by "groaning shadows"—thereby transforming state violence into sacred responsibility. This is precisely the sort of what Žižek identifies as systemic: violence which is observed as law, ritual, or tradition and therefore rendered invisible to those who benefit from it. As Gregg notes, the Goths' horrified response—"O cruel, irreligious piety!"—reveals the cultural gap which exists between insiders who naturalize the violence and outsiders who experience it as a disaster. Roman law "even requires violence in the pursuit of justice," Gregg argues, and the absence of dissent from Roman citizens indicates the complete internalization of this ideology. In Žižekian terms, systemic violence functions here as the normalizing force that naturalizes destruction beneath the mask of legality, making cruelty appear not only permissible but culturally imperative.

The fragility of this system becomes evident when Titus applies these juridical logics inside his own family, killing his own son, Mutius, for resisting his authority. For Gregg, this moment exposes the self-consuming nature of systemic violence: once internalized, the logic of legally sanctioned brutality no longer distinguishes between public and private spheres. Titus's act demonstrates Žižek's claim that systemic violence operates prior to (and indeed generates) the spectacular subjective violence that dominates the play's later acts. The Roman legal order that earlier justified the sacrifice of a Goth prince now rationalizes filicide, revealing a system so dependent on ritualized violence that it cannot maintain moral coherence. As Gregg suggests, the tragedy of Titus Andronicus is not just about the individuals commit monstrous acts but it strongly shows that political and legal structures governing Rome make monstrosity both inevitable and legitimate. Through Žižek's theoretical lens, Gregg's interpretation shows that systemic violence is the engine leads to social decay: a juridical structure whose sanctioned brutality ultimately devours the very society it was designed to uphold.

3.4 Symbolic Violence

In defining Symbolic violence, Žižek notes:

There is a "symbolic" violence embodied in language and its forms, what Heidegger would call "our house of being." As we shall see later, this violence is not only at work in the obvious-and extensively studied-cases of incitement and of the relations of social domination reproduced in our habitual speech forms: there is a more fundamental form of violence still that pertains to language as such, to its imposition of a certain universe of meaning. Second, there is what I call "systemic" violence, or the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems. (Violence 1-2)

Chiron and Demetrius initially shift the threat of rape from the physical violence to the realm of language, establishing it as symbolic language before carrying it out as an act of subjective violence. Following the attack, in which Lavinia is raped, has her hands cut off and her tongue cut out, Chiron and Demetrius mock her:

CHIRON: Go home, call for sweet water, wash thy hands.

DEMETRIUS: She hath no tongue to call, nor hands to wash,
And so let's leave her to her silent walks.

CHIRON : And 'twere my cause, I should hang myself.

DEMETRIUS : If thou hadst hands to help thee knit the cord (2.3.6-10)

So rape is considered as both systemic and symbolic violence in this play. Chiron and Demetrius use language smoothly and confidently to tell Lavinia she will never use language again. But in silencing her they have inadvertently made her the most powerful character in the play. What the rape means for them is straightforward: an expression of their power. What it means for her is beyond language, beyond imagining. That is what her silence conveys to us, and from this point on

that silence haunts the play. (Leggatt 8)

The image which is portrayed by Marcus hides the symbolic violence of the act, diverting attention away from the unnatural manner of the attack. Marcus mourns for Lavinia's loss as chaste, pure woman in the same language that Chiron and Demetrius use to mock her before and after the attack. Here it is observed the hierarchy established in the play to which female characters are obedient. In order for Tamora to exact the revenge she desires upon Titus, she must parallel herself in patriarchal society. This movement corresponds to the masculinization of her character; Lavinia says to her 'O Tamora, thou bearest a woman's face -', before being interrupted. This sentence is based on the 'presumption of a binary gender system'. Lavinia is overtly a female character, in the opening scene finding herself the helpless victim of a patriarchal struggle and the bargaining chip in a matrimonial debate; she is a prediscursive and discursive 'woman'. Although Tamora is biologically a woman, in her pursuit of revenge, she does not act like a 'female'. In representations of women, the passive Lavinia and active Tamora, Shakespeare draws gender into a larger debate within the play surrounding the performativity and expectation of roles.

Another instance of Symbolic Violence enacted by Lavinia appears when she asks Tamora to be a "Charitable Murderer" which shows her verbal violence towards Tamora. In this moment, Lavinia reserves the power dynamic and uses language to wound Tamora in a way that mirrors the symbolic violence. Her appeal is not a plea for mercy and kindness instead it mirrors Tamora's cruelty.

3.4.1 Symbolic violence and The Obscenity of Language

Aaron plays a minor role in this play. Although he is considered as Tamora's servant and lover, he remains outside the power structure. His many actions form another violent strand in the play, but his language is also especially virulent. Unlike Tamora, Aaron does not try to hide his evil character and in contrast to Tamora, Aaron is quite willing to breach his contract with Titus.

In two parts of the play, the symbolic violence by Aaron's language is portrayed obviously: Act V, which is perhaps one of the most profound moments of "grotesque comedy" in the play, when Aaron describes the broken contract with Lucius: I played the cheater for thy father's hand, / And when I had it, drew myself apart / And almost broke my heart with extreme laughter. / I pried me through the crevice of a wall / When, for his hand, he had his two sons' heads. / Beheld his tears, and laughed so heartily / That both mine eyes were rainy like to his.

When Aaron is presented with his own son, he brightly accepts him, "Why, then she is the devil's dam. A joyful issue!" Tamora's Nurse (a Goth), however, does not observe the joyful issue in the child that Aaron claims to see, but rather "A joyless, dismal, black, and sorrowful issue! / Here is the babe, as loathsome as a toad / Amongst the fair-faced breeders of our clime / The Empress sends it thee, thy stamp, thy seal".

4. Conclusion

A Žižekian reading of *Titus Andronicus* fundamentally reorients our understanding of the play's pervasive cruelty. It reveals that the gruesome acts of subjective violence—the murders, rapes, and cannibalism—are not the cause of Rome's decay but rather its most visible symptom. The true tragedy unfolds in the silent, invisible operations of objective violence: the systemic coercion of Roman law and political institutions, and the symbolic violence embedded in its language, rituals, and patriarchal codes. These ideological mechanisms, which first manufacture loyal subjects like Titus, ultimately consume them. Therefore, the play's infamous bloodshed is neither senseless nor merely spectacular; it is the logical and inevitable culmination of a social order founded upon and sustained by systemic and symbolic violence. Through this lens, *Titus Andronicus* emerges not as a simple revenge tragedy, but as a profound critique of civilization itself, exposing how the very structures designed to ensure order are inherently generative of the barbarism they claim to oppose.

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