

Paradise Lost As A Gendering Literature Of The Puritan Age.**Suman Sarkar**Department of English
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Napaam, Sonitpur, Assam, India**Abstract**

John Milton according to my viewpoint can be considered one of the key figure who was not satisfied with the dominant religion. To intensify the essence of Protestantism in form of Puritanism he had to struggle a lot. Through a detailed analysis of John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* and the religious milieu he lived in and observed, his puritan ideology in his masterpiece can be traced. After a minute and close analysis of the poem I could find that there are a number of Puritan elements included in book IX of *Paradise Lost*. Therefore, the poem has been a topic for discussion among the critics as they try to reveal, enumerate and explain these elements. Moreover, the poem shows how book IX of *Paradise Lost* can be viewed as the epitome of misogyny; so it makes an effort to nullify McColley's claim regarding Milton's equality of sexes.

Key Words: Gender, Religion, Puritanism, Misogyny, Equality.

INTRODUCTION: McColley in her article that was published in 1999 argues that Milton was a poet who considered the equality between the sexes like she points out that Adam and Eve were equal. According to her, Milton in *Paradise Lost* does not have a misogynist perspective at all and tries to declare that the poet represents a mutual respect between both the genders. She believes that even Milton considers this equality of sexes and no sex is superior to the other one and also ensures this equality. The notion of "women's spiritual equality" was aggrandized by the precursors of the reformation according to her, which makes her argument in some sense stronger and she also claims that Milton also followed the same process. He, according to her praises female qualities more than the male ones which is an epic tradition. She also claims that "its characters and its bardic voice are sexually distinct, but the poem is androgynous". The form and imagery of Milton's epic poem balances both the feminine and masculine construction of gender.

In fact, by a close reading of Milton's *Paradise Lost* we can see not only the poet disregards the equality of the sexes, but also in many cases Milton identifies the character of Eve similar with Satan. In book IX, for example, there are many similarities between Eve's and Satan's discourses, and in many parts Eve is a divided as well as marginalized character which proves Milton's misogyny. Spurr (1998) believes that "misogynistic Puritans resented the concession to women. Satan and Eve use a language in which meaning constantly changes in every situation. Satan is a cunning angel who plays with language and applies a word with many significations and meanings. This playful

language is used by him to consciously tempt and deceive the new creation of God. We can see this when he says that to become more powerful and knowledgeable creature, one has to go towards death, so the word “death” is not something necessarily terrible according to him, it is cleverly framed by him. In other words, he means that death will bring happiness to Eve as a better life awaits her. Therefore, Eve, the innocent and ignorant creation of God is deceived by Satan that “death” brings life and knowledge:

“So saying, her rash hand in evil hour

Forth reaching to the fruit, she plucked, she ate:

Earth felt the wound, and nature from her seat

Sighing through all her works gave signs of woe,

That all was lost. Back to the thicket slunk

The guilty serpent, and well might, foe Eve

Intent now wholly on her taste, naught else

Regarded, such delight till then, as seemed,

In fruit she never tasted, whether true

Or fancied so, through expectation high

Of knowledge, nor was godhead from her thought.

Greedily she engorged without restraint,

And knew not eating death: satiate at length,

And heightened as with wine, jocund and boon,

Thus to herself she pleasingly began” (book IX, 780-894).

Similar to Satan’s discourse, Eve is also playful when she talks about the idea of death. First and foremost, she refers to the idea of death as something which is to be feared. Further, when she transgresses and disobeys God, Adam also follows her and breaks the rules set by God. Consequently, they head towards death together. As a matter of fact, the meaning of “death” eventually changes for both Eve and Satan. Loewenstein (2004) relates Satan’s changing discourse to the Puritan politics of the Seventeenth century. He believes that:

“What is disconcerting about Satan’s political discourse is that he easily manipulates opposing kinds of political rhetoric, sometimes within the very same speech. His self-presentation and “potent tongue”... are especially compelling precisely because, capable of assuming new shapes and using different political discourses, he himself readily appropriates, in addition to aggressive martial rhetoric, the language and gestures of Seventeenth-century Revolutionary politics and resistance”.

The fall and temptation are not only the ideas that are discussed in John Milton's epic *Paradise Lost* and particularly book IX. When we closely analyze the text, we can come up with the idea that what causes the fall is more a matter of motivation of Eve rather any outer force powering them to fall. This motivation has been seen in previous books as well. Milton is going to build an ideal state in the Prelapsarian period, but for many reasons this ideal state of paradise is essentially destroyed. This idea is in parallel with Milton's Puritan ideology in some ways. In fact, we can observe his religious ideology in the very representation and fragmentation of the character of Eve as a female. This makes Milton's paradise fragmented as this issue itself creates a hierarchy of superior and inferior state of being. In book IX, when Raphael passes the message of God to the new creation, Eve eavesdrop the message which means that Eve is not superior than Adam to receive the message directly. Eve tries to prove her independence as she is not satisfied with this marginalization; this is evident in the following lines of the poem. If once the idea of hierarchy is fully grasped, we see that the order is destroyed in two ways: by ruling or obeying natural equals, that is tyranny or servility. The second way is by failing to obey a natural superior or to rule a natural inferior that is, by rebellion or remissness.

This hierarchical nature can be observed in the light of modern idea of nature versus culture. In the paradise Adam names animals and other entities, while Eve is allowed to name the plants which associate her with nature. In fact, nature implies weakness and a lower position while culture implies such concepts as dynamism and higher position in the society. Therefore, hierarchy is kept in this ideal state. Eve is willing to go and work alone which is an indication of her desire for autonomy and independence. She says when she works alone; she can better concentrate on her work. Adam is always worried because he knows that Satan hopes to find a way to disrupt their strong determination. Adam tries to alert Eve that if Satan finds one of them alone, he may easily tempt them. Opposed to this idea, Eve feels that her determination is being questioned; she thinks it is being suspected. She believes that she is affirmed enough and can stand against Satan's temptation. Then, Adam informs her about Satan's power of deceiving of the angels and pleads her that they should work together. But, she convinces Adam of leaving her alone and dividing the labor, but as we see in this book there is no returning point at the end. Hence, Eve contrasts Adam's Puritan idea of mutual labor.

The interesting point is that there is the concept of the division of labor at the very beginning of the creation. Adam and Eve are to work mutually and take care of the Garden of Eden. Eve is always striving to improve her position and that is why she refers to the division of labor. Thus, labor is not a spontaneous issue for Eve. She considers that her work is more important to her life. Unlike Eve; Adam gives priority to living and says that their work is a means for their life. Therefore, labor is a predefined concept for Adam as we see:

“Yet not so strictly hath our lord imposed

Labour, as to debar us when we need...

And short retirement urges sweet return” (book IX, 235-250)

THE MARGINALIZATION OF EVE AS A SUBORDINATED CHARACTER: The image we have of Eve in book IX is a person more specifically a female who is already

suffering from an unequal position. There are some situations where Eve yearns to stabilize her position and make it equal with Adam. But she can be considered as a subordinated character who struggles to relish her rights. As a matter of fact, we can consider that the marginalization of Eve as a female character is a Puritan ideology that emerges from Milton's Puritan doctrine. As Hughes comments:

“Puritans were exhorted to demonstrate their faith through the daily performance of ‘relative duties’ within their households as well as through pious activities more narrowly defined. For women, the duties of a wife took priority; the implications that followed, and the ways in which women found meaning and influence within Puritan families and networks...but the hierarchies of gender are part of the fundamental ordering of societies, so we need to consider what Puritanism contributed to the expectations and possibilities for the proper roles and behavior of women and men”.

Moreover, the character of Eve as a secondary one can be viewed from another angle also. We can claim that Eve is hailed or interpolated not only by Milton but also Adam because her character is predefined in one way or another. In other words, as Adam is created from God and Eve created from Adam can be an evident for this claim. Eve is a flesh from Adam's flesh, which subordinates her. After the fall, Eve tells Adam that she will face the consequences of her disobedience to God, but Adam says that he will sacrifice himself for Eve. In fact, this is a matter of great significance in the Puritan ideology. Therefore, Adam does not consider Eve as an individual who has her own personality but just a part of him, so he is also readily accepts the fall though he is not responsible for it. The following lines prove this conception of Adam.

“Thou therefore also taste, that equal lot
 May join us, equal joy, as equal love;
 Lest thou not tasting, different degree
 Disjoin us, and I then too late renounce
 Deity for thee, when fate will not permit.
 Thus Eve with countenance blithe her story told;
 But in her cheek distemper flushing glowed.
 On the other side, Adam, soon as he heard
 The fatal trespass done by Eve, amazed,
 Astonied stood and blank, while horror chill
 Ran through his veins, and all his joints relaxed;
 From his slack hand the garland wreathed for Eve
 Down dropped, and all the faded roses shed:

Speechless he stood and pale, till thus at length

First to himself he inward silence broke” (book IX, 881-895).

THE ELEMENTS OF GENDERED LITERATURE: Hair remained an issue. In that anti restoration epic *Paradise Lost*, John Milton is at pains to deal with Adam’s hair. Adam is living in the natural state in paradise, and the natural state of course includes nakedness. That is less problematic, in a way, than the fact that Adam’s hair must grow, as he knows no tools nor barber. Milton must not, however, allow his Adam to look like a Cavalier. Adam’s hair is shorter than Eve’s, as Milton explains it should be:

“His fair large front and eye sublime declar’d

Subjection, but requir’d with gentle sway”. (book IV, 300-08)

Long hair, long curls signify wantonness and subjection, feminine, imperfection. Unfallen nature is strangely careful not to let Adam’s hair grow, since Adam can take no technological means to curtail it. What can be more “natural” than letting hair grow? And hair on a young male head, when allowed to grow uncut, does not necessarily remain shorter than a woman’s—as young people in the 1960s satisfactorily demonstrated. To have another person (more especially of the opposite sex) disarrange or remove one’s hair is a sign that the stable self is a fiction. Hair is ever readily subject to drastic change, even at the very spur of the moment, as Belinda will find in *The Rape of the Lock* (1712). Hair, grown or cut (and in youth equally growable or cuttable), is a good indicator of and sign of various other kinds of cultural instability and changefulness. It is noticeable that whenever the English arrive at times of stress and national tension they mess about their hair, as the punks did in the 1980s; such representation of hair enact rebellion and instability, and point out the unfixedness of conventional science including marks of gender and thus gender itself. The Cavalier’s style, was in the eyes of some an offence to traditional masculinity. It expressed the decorative idea of the Renaissance in a mannerist way, favoring the thin figure (like the real body of king Charles I). It favored elegant decoration and appurtenances (lace and plumed hats) and valued airy grace over what was stocky and muscular. We have to wait for the era of Aubrey Beardsly and the aesthetics of the late Victorian age to find another group of English males defining itself in a manner so little in the bulldog style. The King’s own (fatal) representation of himself, the Royal patriarch, as feminine or “effeminate” forced a conceptual disjunction. This is not a question of what we call “sexual orientation”. It was Charles’s father who indulged himself with male favorites; this may have added to a sense of offence in some quarters, but it was not different from the practices of many other Kings. Sexual preferences did not in itself accentuate the “feminine”. King Charles I was considered both feminine and uxorious. Indeed, to be too fond of a woman, or of women, traditionally (if curiously) makes a man “effeminate”. Opponents of King Charles I and his heirs ridiculed them in phrases indicating they are small and soft, as a Marchmont Needham did in perpetually referring to Charles II as “Baby Charles”. These people are not competent; they are not real grown-up males.

Civilization always looked somewhat “feminine”, and “masculinity”, if it is projected too far along one trajectory, ends in the Hobbesian state of Nature. Very few of the patriarchs wanted to be painted warts and all; an endeavor to appropriate the stuff of old “feminine”

monarchic aristocracy is noticeable in all trends, including manners and furnishing. The concept of “sensibility”, a major philosophical idea which was to furnish a partial answer to the conceptual and philosophical-social problems of the new Colonial and mercantile era, was not arrived at in a hurry. The soothing mediation of “sensibility” as the Eighteenth century developed it, ascribed previously “feminine” qualities to normal male psychology and behavior, and assured us of a smoother social interaction during a time of great economic and social disruption. This concept also smoothed the progress to a complex capitalist society and the new industrial age. As G.J. Barker-Benfield points out, part of the program of the new “sensibility” is “the reformation of male manners”. The idea of “sensibility” furnished all classes not only with a concept of “manners” but also with a belief in the inner responsiveness of all mankind. It thus made less terrifying the unavoidable encounter with strangers in this new, more mobile, and constantly exchanging society. Despite Jean Hagstrum’s claim that the “Age of Sensibility” begins with Milton and Dryden, we can see the Restoration was largely without the reassuring mediation of the concept of “sensibility”. Without this emollient and intellectual resource, the Restoration played out its uncertainties, its estrangements, its (often irate) apprehensions of social conflict, and its understanding of conflicts within individual psychology, in terms of what we, following theorists such as Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble*), prefer to call “gender” rather than “sex”. We should remember that this is our terminology, though the concept is arguably already present. “Gender” imbues everything, and nothing is to be discussed without it.

If this was so, it was partly at least because after the Restoration of King Charles I’s son, Charles II which represented a kind of triumph of the “feminine”, there was a sudden lack of clarity about the significance of the genderification of socio-political life. No gender was quite victorious. At this point in English history, and at this point alone, the culture in general demonstrated that it was possible to play with both gender and politics. The situation almost meets the specifications of instability and interrogation implicit in Judith Butler’s prescription: “the task is ...to repeat...and through a radical proliferation of gender, to displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself”. Butler alleges that “there is no ontology of gender on which we might construct a politics” (*Gender Trouble*, p.148). She wants us to recognize this now, when there is a resistance to accepting such a lack, but in England just after 1660 (and through the Revolution of 1688-89), the ontologies of both gender and politics were radically fragmented. What we see in the literature is “a radical proliferation of gender” and a displacement of gender norms. Much of the “wit” for which the era is so often (if often vaguely) celebrated arises from the recognition of the need constantly to repeat gender norms – and constantly to break, reverse, dismiss or otherwise abuse them.

From the point of view of women, the prevalent distrust of both gender norms and political truths, and the consequent lack of simple wholesome clarity, presented certain welcoming opportunities. Writing, which permitted access to public media, including even the very public medium of the stage, was not only economically tempting to women writers, but also psychologically inviting. For the first time it was really possible for a woman to enter this public realm of the kingdom-or-republic-of-letters, and to do so effectively.

If the Restoration, writing becomes a gender –indeterminate activity, if yet an activity incessantly about gender. The restoration’s terms of stylistic criticism are also

terms of gender classification. But any classification is followed by questioning, by revisions of unstable reclassification. Woman did not lose the world in falling from her own original “state of innocence,” but was left behind a primitive “state of ignorance”. This might seem a thoroughly hierarchical arrangement, and orthodox expression of humble inferiority. But it expresses the ability of the mind that owns gentleness and tenderness to seize on the (male) writer’s work not with cold admiration (like a male reader), but with “fire”. The fire of passion, of sexual approval and desire, and the fire of literary imagination kindled are all combined. Dullness and a lack of sexual energy became the properties of males as readers (an implicitly of many male writers). We might anticipate the pose of a male speaker reprehending an unfaithful female – a traditional stance. Complaints against female inconstancy and wickedness traditionally abound in what are very male poems. There is a customary presumption, behind such complaints, that the female has a duty to be constant. Unchastity, according to dominant social morality, is hardly a vice in a man but a dreadful vice in a woman, a terrible fault that makes her totally unsuitable for the male, no matter how many sexual partners he may have. As a male possession she has the absolute duty of not getting stolen. Aggressiveness is a dominant tone or manner of the Restoration and aggressive questioning one of its norms. Sexuality is explored in its connection with power constructs and power relations. Power relations of any kind can hardly be talked of without recourse to sexual language and very conscious gendered imagery.

All questions of war and politics seem here, as elsewhere in Restoration writing, thoroughly sexualized. The word “manly” is scarcely used in this period without irony. The extreme of masculine power has to become an apparently helpless feminized androgyny. Aggression in Restoration writing is intimately related to gender—it is aggression sexualized, enacted between entities with a sexual dynamic that exists even when the conflicted entities are both imaged as of the same sex: for example Satan and Christ in *Paradise Regained* (both male). We ought, so Puritans tell us, strictly to contemplate only reality, and some complaints against “romance” or fiction in general are based on the dislike of human contriving an escape from the reality God gave us to deal with. (For Puritans and other religious people, of course, reality includes divine reality). Fictions clutter up the psyche, displacing what ought to be there: “They leave the memory so full of fantastical images of things which are not, that they cannot easily dismiss them”. It is, however, hard to find pure material for the furnishing of the mind. When writers (even historians or philosophers) offer to bring us “reality”, they, like the Romancers, are offering us mere representations. The Renaissance had already felt the difficulties arising from the proliferation of mere language. Words were supposedly merely feminine, after all, and only deeds masculine.

To neither male nor female authors, evidently, is it clear that males excel at writing, or that writing is an essentially masculine activity—even if it is never an essentially feminine activity. Writing is power but only in terms which allow others access to the same power. Hierarchy is destroyed and obedience rendered naught by the power of a woman to make up her own world— a world that can be innocent of any tales of Adam and his rib or Eve and the serpent.

Milton challenges his readers in *Paradise Lost*, at once fulfilling and defying all of our expectations. Nothing in the epic tradition or in biblical interpretation can prepare us

for the Satan who hurtles into view in book One, with his awesome energy and defiance, incredible fortitude, and, above all, magnificent rhetoric. For some readers, including Blake and Shelley, Satan has been the true hero of the poem. But Milton is engaged in a radical re-evaluation of epic values, and Satan's version of heroism must be contrasted with those of the loyal Abdiel and the son of God. Moreover, the poem's truly epic action takes place not on the battlefield but in the moral and domestic arena. Milton's Adam and Eve are not conventional epic heroes, but neither are they the conventional Adam and Eve. Their state of innocence is not childlike, tranquil, and free of sexual desire. Instead, the first couple experience tension and passion, make mistake of judgment, and grow in knowledge. Their task is to prune what is unruly in their own natures as they prune the vegetation in their garden, for both have the capacity to grow passionate for each other. Their relationship exhibits gender hierarchy, but Milton's early readers may have been surprised by the fullness and complexity of Eve's character and the centrality of her role, not only in the Fall but in the promised Restoration.

To conclude, the objective of this article was to show how John Milton's *Paradise Lost* can be viewed as a Puritan text gendering the literature of that period. Through a close reading of book IX, we can believe that the subordination of Eve in Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* was one of the pivotal facets of Puritan ideology. Eve is hailed or interpolated by Milton in general and by Adam in particular. Therefore, the Puritan beliefs and ideology about gender especially women plays an important role in the analysis of *Paradise Lost*. Milton's powerful prose and the eloquence of his poetry had an immense influence on the development of eighteenth century verse. His blank verse poem influenced many subsequent authors and artists, including John Dryden, William Blake, and C.S. Lewis. Milton's success from *Paradise Lost* stems not only from the sheer beauty of its language and powerful characterization, but also endures in the high esteem in which the poem is held to this day. The content of the poem itself, which delves into universal questions on the nature of good and evil, continues to enthrall generations of readers. In the conclusion to his critical essay on *Paradise Lost*, Samuel Johnson sums up Milton's stature as an epic poet with the following:

“The highest praise of genius is original invention. Milton cannot be said to have contrived the structure of an epic poem, and therefore owes reverence to that vigor and amplitude of mind to which all generations must be indebted for the art of poetical narration, for the texture of the fable, the variation of incidents, the interposition of dialogue, and all the stratagems that surprise and enchain attention. But, of all the borrowers from Homer, Milton is perhaps the least indebted. He was naturally a thinker for himself, confident of his own abilities, and disdainful of help or hindrance: he did not refuse admission to the thoughts or images of his predecessors, but he did not seek them. From his contemporaries he neither courted nor received support; there is in his writings nothing by which the pride of other authors might be gratified, or favor gained; no exchange of praise, nor solicitation of support. His great works were performed under discountenance, and in blindness, but difficulties vanished at his touch; he was born for whatever is arduous, and his work is not the greatest of heroic poems, only because it is not the first”.

In the examination of gender in language, boundaries melt and definitions shift. They shift, indeed – as Cavendish wittily shows – into new categories impossible to define by old terms. To use language is to set gender drifting. But as the eighteenth century proceeds we can see the process of laying out new terms, fresh reassurances about stable gender boundaries and relations. The new dictates which stabilized gender arose from a new ideology, a blending of sensibility with the Whiggish politico-economic ideology of the free market and the autonomous economic individual. Not all elements of sensibility as a philosophic concept inevitably lead in this Whiggish direction. The Whiggish individualized ideology and the new picture of gender stability were, however, to be most fully defined in the powerfully influential work of Jean -Jacques Rousseau, whose *Emile* (1762) notably arrives at a firm settlement of gender questions. The new ideology of gender entailed the exchange of the old aggressive tone for a milder, more melancholy one. Gender became the creature of an internalized sensibility rather than the topic of wit's transformative powers.

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