

The Fall of All Passions in Milton's Life and Art

Dr. Suman Kumari

Kurukshetra University,

Kurukshetra

Abstract:

Milton (1608-74) has been read as an epic poet and within it as a writer of a Christian epic, for its sublimity, its Homeric similes, the grandeur of Satan, raising thus the controversy whether he invested the Devil with his own passion for revolt, but rarely has he been studied as to, how having learnt a lesson not to pursue things passionately in the narrow compass, albeit negatively and suffering as himself in his body in the form of blindness, could he envision the fall of Satan and Adam, ignoring rational understanding of things. The present paper purports to underline the fall of passions and emotions in Milton's art and life. It puts in perspective how passions blind us to reason, unabling us, as they did Milton, Satan and Adam. Milton has no tragic view to propound in either, not even in Samson Agonistes as he said in the last mentioned, that there is no tragedy when the mind is Calm in the consequence, when all passions are spent.

Keywords: passion, Freedom, reason, ignorance, knowledge, redeem, justify, Polemical, indetermination.

Milton's tragic view of life is that mankind live by passions and not by reason. He sums up the way to salvation from all kinds of passion—hatred, envy, jealousy, even hope and love through, "Calm of mind all passion spent", a phrase in his Samson Agonistes (L. 1758). All his parsonages, (including his own self) are fallible. Milton himself lived a passional life charging others, as being charged in return, in the thick of political debates that he raised against the censorship of press as for example in

Areopagitica and “on Divorce”, vehemently pleading for easy divorce laws. All his prose writings are polemical in nature.

His pamphlet on poem, called “The Passion” is written on crucifixion, but this theme was not congenial to him, as it involved pain. Milton believed that sorrow is bad, joy good, because the former diminishes the power of body or mind. Passion is not power, but weakness, slavery, as Milton believed. This is the ethical part of Milton’s poetry, but he came to this understanding by the hard way till his passions for writing, his polemical pamphlets resulted in the loss of his eyesight. He came to learn that though there is nothing more useful to man than his own perfection, even as in case of his own affirmation, of his might, but he also came to know that virtuous action is rational action, and not merely one’s egoism. Thus, his blindness was a turning point in his life, a change as against the general belief attested by E.M.W. Tillyard in his introduction to Milton in *Fifteen Poets* that:

Milton never changed from first to last, that his nature was excessively rigid and austere. (107)

Milton put his past life in the higher scheme of things, in knowing the true causes of things or saw them in their necessary relation to God. This becomes evident in his sonnet “On His Blindness”, written around at the age of 42. The sonnet is a dividing line between his earlier and later self, the former marked by passions and the latter by knowledge. His passions charged his mind when he looked at issues most often personal, as for example his mismarriage with Mary Powell, prompting him to write on making easy divorce laws, which subsequently led him to further angry outburst against censor. Similarly, his First Defense is written on behalf of Oliver Cromwell with whom he sided and against Charles I. It was equally virulent. His Second Defense was more of a quarrel against Alexander and in favour of the cause of the commonwealth to which he was personally committed. Of course, he argued that government should not be narrowly formed for one person or persons who rule not by reason but by their whims and desires. There are passages in this book which speak of Milton’s sense of freedom. However, he ignored larger perspective that even his conception of commonwealth as that of Oliver Cromwell could be distortional. Such contradictions in his early writings virtually blinded him to see things in larger contexts.

It is in this context that his sonnet is significant, that it widens his perspective. Milton comes to know that absolute freedom is an illusion. There is no such thing as free will— everything in nature is determined, only when we do not know adequate knowledge, we assert our will. The decision of the will and the causal indetermination are one and the same thing: considered under the attribute of thought we call it determination; man thinks that he is free because he is ignorant of causes. The falling

stone, as Benedict Spinoza says, would regard itself as free if it were conscious. Because he thinks itself free, it forms the idea of praise and blame, sin and guilt. Milton identifies human freedom with indeterminism. This is what he comes to realize that seen in relation to clear knowledge, there is no point in feeling guilty about not returning God's gift or questioning:

Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?

However, he soon realizes that it was a foolish question. Milton's God, as he himself said, does not need either man's work or his own gifts. Milton's God is the rational part of man—the better part, the more he understands the universe in all its relations, the freer will he be from hate and fear, anger and envy, love and hope, pity and repentance. He who knows the true causes of things will love God. This intellectual love of God is the love of God for himself, for man is a mode of God, a mode of knowledge of true causes of things. This God loves himself, i.e., knowledge is godly when one is free from passions which are confused states and inadequate ideas—the passive side of human mind. Milton at the end of the sonnet announces that all that he has to do, indeed, all men, is to suffer the mild yoke, for they also serve who stand and wait. This is no surrender but a submission. This is made possible by Milton's ethical stance, that mind's highest good is knowledge of God and that mind's highest virtue is to know God, i.e. to know the necessary causes, as in his own case i.e., his blindness was caused by passions in losing his eye sight in irrational response to multiple issues; he could not preserve his real being; he could not seek his own true utility, his own true good, nor could he act under the guidance of reason; men who are governed by reason desire nothing for themselves which they do not also desire for the rest of mankind. On the contrary, Milton's earlier life was marred by conflicts. Hence, this sonnet underlines the necessity that he should relinquish his wish, his natural right in order that he may live in peace with others, to quote Walt Whitman:

One's—self I sing, a simple separate person Yet utter the word democratic, the word
En-masse, (From "One's—self I sing")

While Milton recovered himself from his inadequate and confused ideas caused by his passion or pride, that he was not right in his opinions when his blindness overtook him and made him feel that he is determined, Satan on whom most of *Paradise Lost* is centered, could not. It is not that he did not suffer his fall in the worst of dungeons but his indomitable pride will not let him. Satan is all negative emotions which blind him to reason. Before coming to write *Paradise Lost*, Milton deliberated over the choice of his subject. The theme of the fall of man was not initially in his mind, though he wanted to write on some lofty subject comparable to *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*.

Nevertheless, he wanted to write an epic, a Christian epic in it. His passion for individual perfection, his struggle for commonwealth provided him with a new

material, his sufferings at the hands of his enemies but his blindness changed the course of his life. Except for a little murmur, Milton submitted to rational understanding that the service to God is not what God requires; he is above all these things, and indeed, unlike human beings, is not swayed by passions. It is the lesser beings, may they be archangels and even God's chosen creatures, who are stirred up with envy and love, akin to mental blindness. Milton seems to think that lesser mortals do not realize the force of emotions. In his description and speeches of Satan, Milton does not blame the arch rebel so much as he focuses on his slavery to passions. It is not that Satan's mind was in anyway defective, it was only not equal to his blinding passion of envy, particularly against God's chosen creatures – Adam and Eve

Milton does not dismiss passions and emotions from human life; rather what he seems to say is that they should be understood in their origin and nature. They are natural like other things, follow as they do, the same necessity as virtue and other things. What Milton suggests in the fall of Satan is that he in preserving his egotistical self, ignores that he should seek his own true good or act under the guidance of reason, and that he should have desired nothing for himself which he did not desire for the rest of mankind. Adam and Eve were not his rivals, but even if he thought them so, love of enemy is good; hatred and envy are evil; this understanding would have helped him to achieve unity of purpose with Adam and Eve. Indeed, nothing helps a man to preserve his real being more than another rational being; hence, while seeking our own good and being good to one another, we would create a commonwealth which Milton desired.

Satan's fall from heaven to Hell was brought about by his obdurate pride, more specifically what he called his "injured merit" in relation to the creation of Adam and Eve whom God not only created and placed them in the Garden of Eden but were also very dear to him. Had Satan thought that nothing exists in isolation and that man who seeks his own true utility will be useful in loving others, he would not have gone to tempt Eve. He did not understand that the new creatures were also not free, as they were also not allowed to eat the fruit of forbidden tree, as he also was not free to hate other creatures and thereby weaken his strength. Both Adam-Eve and Satan disobeyed eternal order by their respective emotional responses.

There is something of both Satan and Adam-Eve in Milton of his earlier life when he charged others even the state passionally. William Blake was not very off the mark when he said that Milton was of Devil's party, without knowing it. However, he purged himself through the fall of Satan. Paradise Lost is an attempt on Milton's part, though it required a great deal of effort, to understand that we are determined both by our nature and the force of emotions. All passions and emotions are, however not negative. The difference between positive and negative emotions and passions is that while the former increases our power of acting, the latter decrease our comprehension

and grasp of the whole of things. What promotes our comprehension is good. Joy, for example, is good, sorrow bad. Sorrow is the transition from greater to less. This is reflected in the defeat of Satan and his subsequent failure to take on God. He rather chooses a devious path of injuring the Almighty i.e., knowledge with ignorance by bringing down the fall of his loved creatures.

In the first book itself, Satan expresses his sense of loss, though he still nurses grievance against God. The cause of his sorrow, his pain, his injury, is his hope to take revenge and thus rehabilitate himself in heaven

Milton's companion pieces "L'Allegro" "Il Penseroso" represent two attitudes of joy and sorrow. "L'Allegro" is a happy man. He dismisses melancholy, the child of blackest midnight where darkness spreads its jealous wings and invokes the goddess of joy, Emprosyny, so called in heaven by men of heart-easing mirth. On the other, Il Penseroso bids farewell to joys. Such is Milton's muse. The fallen Angels in Paradise Lost Book I also bewail that they must change for heaven, this mournful gloom of hell but do not make any effort to redeem themselves. Milton feels that striving for joy is the very essence of every living thing; we feel joy when we are able to pass to a higher state of being; we feel sorrow though passivity and suffering when we pass to a lower state. Satan's actions are mechanical; they are in the nature of his reactions, there is no love, no joy in what he does; on the contrary, he passes on to a lower existence and becomes a sneaking snake to tempt Eve. In his invocation to the Muse, Milton himself urges the Deity to:

What in me is dark

Illumine, what is low raise and support,

That to the height of this great argument

I may assert eternal providence,

And justify the ways of God to man

(PL. BK I, 23-26)

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