

The Ideology of Puritanism in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

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ABSTRACT

John Milton can be considered one of the key figures who was not satisfied with the dominant religion and struggled to intensify the essence of Protestantism in form of Puritanism. Through a minute analysis of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the religious context he lived in, his Puritan ideology in his masterpiece can be traced. It is believed that there are a number of puritan elements embedded in book IX of *Paradise Lost*. Therefore, the authors try to reveal, enumerate and explain these elements. In doing so, Louis Althusser's symptomatic reading of ideology will be applied as a background theory so as to justify the main idea of the study. Moreover, the will show 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: Puritanism, Milton, Ideology, Althusser, Sexes

INTRODUCTION

McColley in her article published in 1999 defends Milton as a poet who considers the equality between Adam and Eve. Moreover, she believes that Milton in *Paradise Lost* does not have a misogynist perspective and tries to remark that the poet portrays a mutual respect between the sexes. McColley believes that even Milton in his tracts considers such equality of sexes and no sex is superior to the other one. Further, she points out that the precursors of the Reformation tried to aggrandize "women's spiritual equality" and Milton followed the same procedure. She also claims that Milton follows the epic tradition of praising female qualities more than the male ones. She claimed that "its characters and its bardic voice are sexually distinct, but the poem is androgynous." (184) She maintains that "the form and imagery of *Paradise Lost* balance masculine and feminine constructs. Its language combines linear logic with circumferential awareness; the design is sturdily architectural, but the radiant consciousness so suffuses it with dance that subsequence and precedence are constantly transposed" (183-4).

What McColley points out in her article seems to be the falsification of Milton's text. In fact, her argument escapes signification in Milton's book, because she struggles to impose her argument to the text. In the light of Althusserian symptomatic reading, we can unveil the inherent oppositions of her claims regarding *Paradise Lost*. 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 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, the absence of preaching which they believed should accompany sacraments, and most importantly the plain implication that baptism in some way conveyed grace and so contributed to salvation." (32) Satan and Eve use a language in which meaning constantly changes. Satan plays with language and applies a word with many significations. He consciously uses such a playful language to tempt and deceive the new creation. For instance, he uses the word "death" with a variety of significations. Once he says "death" is not something necessarily terrible, and if you want to transform into a more knowledgeable and powerful creature, you have to go towards death. In other parts Satan says that if you die, a better life is expecting you, and you will be happier. Therefore, Eve 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, for 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 playful when she talks about the idea of death. First and foremost, she refers to death as something which she cannot stand. Further, when she transgresses and disobeys God, Adam follows her. So they move towards death together. As a matter of fact, the meaning of "death" gradually changes for 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 (204).

APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

During reading and analyzing a literary text, the reader may discover the theme of the text. Such a theme or main idea of the text will be the symptom of the text, according to the French critic Louis Althusser. A naïve reader would read the text and tries to impose to the text whatever idea does not conform to the main idea of the text. In this case, everything in the text conforms to the final theme and the ultimate meaning of the text. As Payne and Barbera point out symptomatic reading is "a strategy for the interpretation of theoretical texts employed by Althusser, and based upon the Freudian analyst's technique for uncovering the "latent content" behind the "manifest content" of dreams and Parapraxes;" therefore, Althusser believes that "Texts are governed by their "problematic," which determines not only the questions posed and the answers given, but also the problems omitted by them" (579). It has commonly been assumed that an Althusserian reader tries to uncover and expose the paradoxes and contradictions of the text he reads. This is, in fact, a kind of critical reading that reveals the inherent oppositions in the author's system of belief, represented in the literary text. Therefore, "the 'symptomatic reading' which sought to reconstruct the latent structural matrix (or theoretical 'problematic') generative of the manifest serial discourse" (Elliott 180). Accordingly, this paper starts from the symptom of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and goes on to clarify how such an ideology makes book IX of Milton's masterpiece the exemplary of his puritan beliefs.

MILTON AS A PURITAN

As a young man, Milton believed that God has determined his destiny to be an epic poet in the future. So, influenced by such a religious conception, he had been thinking about

composing the greatest epic poem in English. According to Bremer (2009) "Nonconformity still had an influence on the nation's politics and culture, however, and the following decades saw some of the major puritan contributions to literature, including Puritan experiments John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) and John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*" (1678). (27-28) After his graduation from college, he memorized the Bible. He was one of the key revolutionary figures who supported the Government of Cromwell, who a puritan leader. He mainly demonstrates his religious ideas in his tract *De Doctrina Christiana*, in which he believes that the realization of God is far from human comprehension and we have to take for granted what God has pointed out in the Bible. To be honest, such religious ideas can improve our awareness of *Paradise Lost*. His religious ideologies are very close to the doctrines which were formed by the Reformation. Bremer and Webster (2006) believe that "His prominence as a "puritan" during this period must therefore acknowledge not only his political significance and theological opinions, but his poetic and literary achievements, which cannot be divorced from his puritan credentials and for which he is chiefly remembered." (174)

THE FALL: SYMPTOM

Before anything else, *Paradise Lost* is about the fall of human being. Thus, it is the symptom, or the main idea, of Milton's masterpiece; but even such a religious concept as fall is highly influenced by the poet's puritan ideologies. Milton believes that mankind possesses free will, and he has the prerogative of choosing and directing his own destiny. So man must accept the consequences of his actions. Bremer (2009) explores that "This was a central tenet of puritan belief, confirmed by their observation of the behavior of others, but even more so by their awareness of the darker impulses of their own nature and their own actual sins against God's law" (41). In fact, God will not prevent us from doing evil. According to this idea, which dominates Milton's *Paradise Lost* and is apparent in book IX, God is aware of the future but does not direct human course of actions. Indeed, this is an issue which is a contradiction *per se* and lies at the heart of religious ideologies. Accordingly, Adam and Eve's redemption depends on their faith and actions. Determining man's destiny is beyond God's justice. The duty of man is to serve himself by being decent, moderate, chaste, and patient. Milton puts the burden of responsibility of the fall on Adam and Eve and struggles to justify the way of God to man. As mentioned earlier, such an idea can be traced back in his tract *De Doctrina Christiana*. In book IX Adam several times refers to the fact that God has created us with free will, and we are free to choose our way. This happens especially when Adam refers to Eve as "Woman" which can signify the liberty of Eve to work alone to stay with Adam. Therefore, Eve decides to go away and work alone. Subsequently, it is based on her free will that she picks the forbidden fruit and brings the fall. Bremer maintains that "Puritans might disagree over the process whereby all who came into the world were tainted by this original sin, but they were united in their understanding of the consequences for Adam and Eve and for all men and women who came after

them—physical suffering, illness, and death became part of the human condition; spiritually, human faculties were disoriented and the soul corrupted.” (37)

THE EDEN: MILTON'S IDEAL STATE?

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* in general, and book IX in particular does not merely cover such ideas as fall and temptation. Through a close analysis of the book we can come up with the idea that what causes the fall is more a matter of motivation of Eve rather than an outer hand to power them to fall. In fact, such a motivation has been provided in the previous books. In the prelapsarian period, Milton is going to build an ideal state, but for many reasons such an ideal paradise is already essentially cracked. This idea is in parallel with Milton's puritan ideology. In fact, his religious ideology is represented in the very fragmentation of the character of Eve as a female. This issue by itself creates a hierarchical state of superior versus inferior which makes Milton's Paradise fragmented. In book IX when Raphael passes the message of God the new creation, Eve eavesdrop the message which means that Eve is not superior enough to receive the message directly. But in the following lines of the poem we realize that Eve is not satisfied with this Marginalization and tries to prove her autonomy in the poem. According to Lewis (1969) “Now if once the conception of Hierarchy is fully grasped, we see that order can be destroyed in two ways: (I) By ruling or obeying natural equals, that is by Tyranny or Servility. By failing to obey a natural superior or to rule a natural inferior that is, by Rebellion or Remissness. And these, whether they are monstrosities of equal guilt or no, are equally monstrosities (74).

Such a hierarchy and marginalization can be observed in the light of the modern idea of nature versus culture. In the Paradise Adam is allowed to name animals and other entities, while Eve just is capable of naming the plants which associates her with culture. In fact, culture implies such concepts as dynamism and being in a higher position in the society, while nature implies weakness and a lower position in the society. Therefore, this hierarchy is already kept in this ideal state. Milton always struggles to reveal the mentality of Eve which is prone to fall not because of temptation but because of the motives which had already paved the way for her disobedient actions.

INNER LIGHT

According to puritan ideology what can save human and directs him towards redemption is the inner light of faith. In book IX of *Paradise Lost*, Satan enters the Garden of Eden. Satan is to disguise himself as a serpent and tempt Eve the pick the fruit of the tree of knowledge. He praises the earth and believes that it is superior to the Heaven. The only action to satisfy his mischievous desire of revenge is to corrupt the new creation of God. In fact, Satan is seeking a way to deceive God's new creation by targeting their faith towards God. For Adam, faith is a kind of inner light bestowed by God, which is a puritan ideology. But, for Eve, faith is something to be tested; that is, it is

not preexisted and spontaneous. Regarding the puritan idea of faith Bremer (2009) believes that “But the men willing to run his church believed in many of the new ideas of the Reformation regarding decentralized church authority, the importance of faith as opposed to works in the pathway to salvation, and rejection of many of the traditional sacraments.” (4-5) Indeed, Eve, unlike Adam, believes that faith must be proven and that is why she insists to work alone in the Garden. Therefore, we can claim that Eve has a realistic view of faith. When she talks with Adam, she believes that faith is bestowed to me and I have to earn it. Adam, on the contrary, remarks that we are created in a place where temptation is essentially there, and we are warned not to be deceived by it. So we have to protect ourselves and avoid the temptation not be expose ourselves to such a great danger to be tested by it, which is in parallel with the puritan idea of inner light. Thus, Adam and Eve have essentially different ideas regarding the concept of faith. So such a contradiction can be considered as one of the oppositions in the symptomatic ideology of *Paradise Lost*. According to Zafirovski (2007) “Generally, Puritan theological roots lie in what he detects as the Calvinist combination of “faith in absolutely valid norms with absolute determinism and the complete transcendentality of God,” i.e., a mixture of moral absolutism and deterministic theology, normative monism, and religious predestination distinguished by Weber from predetermination and fatalism.” (85)

THE IDEA OF RECIPROCITY

Another puritan ideology is the idea of mutual working. Following the Althusserian methodology, we can trace another essential contradiction in this puritan ideology. As we see in book IX of *Paradise Lost*, Adam and Eve wake up early morning and after their usual praying discuss the matter of labor. 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 advance her job. Adam is always worried and believes that Satan hopes to find a way to disrupt their strong determination. Adam tries to persuade Eve that if Satan meets one of them alone, he may easily tempt them. Opposed to this idea, Eve feels that her determination is questioned. She suffers from Adam's suspicion, because she believes that she is affirmed enough and can stand against Satan's temptation. Then, Adam refers to Satan's power of deceiving of the angels and believes that they have to work together. Finally, she convinces Adam of leaving him, but as we see in this book there is no returning point at the end. So Eve contrasts Adam's puritan idea of mutual labor. Bremer (2009) believes that the idea of mutual working is central to puritan doctrine. He observes that “Social gatherings that involved feasting, telling stories, and sharing news were forms of recreation embraced by puritans. They regularly gathered with friends and neighbors for parties, to commemorate the ordination of a new clergyman, to work together in raising the town's meetinghouse or a townsman's barn, and or to celebrate weddings and baptisms. (60)

The interesting point is that there is division of labor at the very beginning of the creation. Adam and Eve are going

to work mutually and take care of the Garden. Eve is always ready to dominate and improve her position and that is why she refers to the division of labor. Thus, labor is not a spontaneous issue for Eve. She believes that her work is prior to her life. Unlike Eve, Adam gives priority to living and points out that their work is a means for their life. Accordingly, labor is a predefined concept for Adam:

Yet not so strictly hath our Lord imposed
Labour, as to debar us when we need
Refreshment, whether food, or talk between,
Food of the mind, or this sweet intercourse
Of looks and smiles, for smiles from reason flow,
To brute denied, and are of love the food,
Love not the lowest end of human life.
For not to irksome toil, but to delight
He made us, and delight to reason joined.
These paths and bowers doubt not but our joint hands
Will keep from wilderness with ease, as wide
As we need walk, till younger hands ere long
Assist us: but if much converse perhaps
Thee satiate, to short absence I could yield.
For solitude sometimes is best society,
And short retirement urges sweet return (book IX, 235-250).

THE MARGINALIZATION OF EVE AS A HAILED CHARACTER

The image we have of Eve in book IX is a person who is already divided and suffering from an unequal position. There exist many indications that Eve strives to stabilize her position and make it equal. But she can be considered as a subordinated character after all who struggles to take her rights back at any cost. So she can be observed as a cruel character, because she knows that she is fallen and is premeditating on the fall of Adam. There are a number of indications that Adam must share the fall with her. As a matter of fact, we can say that the subordination of Eve as a female character is a puritan ideology which comes from Milton's puritan doctrine. According to Hughes (2008):

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 behaviour of women and men. (294)

Moreover, Eve can be viewed as a secondary character from another angle. Based on Althusser's theories, we can claim that Eve is hailed or interpolated by not only Milton but also Adam. Her character is predefined in a way or another. In other words, that Adam is created from God, but Eve created from Adam can be a proof for this claim. Adam believes that Eve is a flesh from his flesh, which subordinates Eve. After the fall, Eve tells Adam that she will endure the consequences of her disobedience, but Adam points out

that he will sacrifice himself for Eve. In fact, this is an issue of great significance in the puritan ideology. So Adam does not consider Eve as an individual who has her own personality but as a part of him that is taken away:

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).

CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to show how John Milton's *Paradise Lost* can be viewed as a puritan text. Through a close reading of book IX, the author of the paper applied the Althusserian theory of symptomatic reading so as to reveal and enumerate both the contradictions of the text and the puritan elements that are embedded in the text. These puritan elements seem to be related to the poet's society and culture as Milton was a puritan himself. Moreover, the researcher tried to contradict Diane K. McColley's article "Milton and the Sexes." According to McColley Milton treated Adam and Eve in a totally equal position, and he had not been a misogynist as well. The current paper tried to challenge this claim by enumerating many puritan ideologies in a symptomatic reading of the text. Based on such a method of reading the text, the paper tried to relate all such puritan elements to the poet's own religious ideology. Some of these elements are the idea of the fall itself, the paradisaical or heavenly state, misogyny, the idea of inner light, etc. the researcher believed that the subordination of Eve in Milton's text was one of the pivotal facets of puritan ideology. Eve is considered to be hailed or interpolated by Milton in general and by Adam in particular. Therefore, ideology plays an important role in the analysis of *Paradise Lost*. The researcher believes that this poem can be analyzed in the light of semiotics in the subsequent studies. The logic behind this idea lies in the fact that the language of the poem is highly playful in some parts, and therefore, it can be fertile ground for semiotic studies.

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