

Gender Hierarchy and Milton

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Introduction

The present paper tries to analyse the representation of hierarchy in John Milton's works especially in *Paradise Lost*. Scholars have tried to bring out the gender hierarchy in Milton's works with a specific context, while the prose works and the epic *Paradise Lost* are preoccupied with the theme of hierarchy in various contexts. Milton's representation of hierarchy should be seen in the light of his prose works as his hierarchical structures are not straight forward and differ with the works depending on the context. Therefore, in order to analyse the representation of hierarchy in *Paradise Lost* relevant prose works will also be examined. In Milton's precursors and contemporaries, there was none to question the gender hierarchy or inequality in man-woman relationship. The liberal views of Milton will also be evaluated in the present work despite his subjection to severe opposition from the critics of his age.

Keywords: Gender, Politics, Society, Ecology Church.

The question of gender equality and hierarchy in man - woman relationship has a been a subject of debate for a long period of time. The problem of general attitudes toward woman is engendered by the traditional understanding of the biblical texts. This paper shows that Milton was much ahead of his times in his hierarchical world view that led him to assume that every creature has its proper place in this universe. As a seventeenth century protestant, Milton was aware and familiar with the rights and responsibilities of each individual. Milton's work challenges the authority, as several of his prose works suggest that subjects should be allowed to depose an unjust king, yet it is also evident from his works that he emphasises the importance of respecting and maintaining hierarchies. The present paper will include a combination of views on maintaining gender hierarchy as Milton's works not only show a preoccupation with gender hierarchies, but also an apparent ambivalence.

Literature always expresses the thoughts and sentiments of human minds which are closely connected with and conditioned by the age in which they emerge. The essence of the literature lies in the individual approach of the author, his personality which dominates over other influences. The mid-seventeenth century was the time of great social and cultural turmoil in England. It was time of intense social unrest and disorder in all areas of life especially religious, scientific, political, domestic relations and culture. Some of the most important political issues during the period are related to hierarchical authority, monarchy and church government. The church as a rigid master dominated the throne, and its subject and the impact of orthodox Christianity was unshaken and people still followed the biblical principles. Therefore, in the backdrop of this any departure from the established norms and customs were to become a subject of criticism, yet the process of transition is inevitable in all ages.

The background of debate in the seventeenth century about theology and state of nature greatly influenced Milton's thought and argument. His seemingly conflicting ideas on hierarchy are apparent in his views on monarchical authority and episcopal policy, which find representation in his prose works as well as in *Paradise Lost*. Milton uses the concept of hierarchy to criticise the monarch's rule, as he questions the validity of the monarch's authoritative position. He criticises the manner in which the monarchical authority falsely claims personal superiority in order to sustain his authority. Milton feels that no man should have the right to claim divine authority and the adherence to the sovereign immunity hinders the possibility of a monarch serving the benefit of his country. It is important to note here that Milton is not against obedience to authority, as he does express that it is "needful to ordain some authority" in order to ensure "peace and common right"

It is evident from Milton's prose works as well as *Paradise Lost* those hierarchical systems and the related issue of obedience to authority are extensively discussed. The importance of rightful authority is emphasised and his warning of the conscience being oppressed by unjust authority is also apparent in his rejection of the episcopal form of church government. In order to establish what rightful authority to obey, it is necessary that a person's psychological autonomy is not limited. Therefore, whereas willing obedience is important when it concerns rightful authority, such as God, Milton believes that one should have the right to resist authority when it is unjust by utilising "the gift of reason to be his own chooser" (Areopagitica 110) Issue of hierarchy in gender is another context in which Milton's pre-occupation is evident. Milton's representation of gender seems ambivalent throughout his works. He argues for a mutuality that suggests a type of equality, and also depicts a strict adherence to a gender hierarchy, without deviating from the limitations a gender hierarchy

would require. The present paper will analyse Milton's complex representation of gender, while taking the importance of hierarchy into consideration.

Milton's concept of hierarchy in man-woman relationship is a Biblical doctrine and according to this principle man is not independent of woman, in fact both are supplementary and complementary to each other. The basic concept of gender relationship in Christian thought was a potent driving force of the western civilisation. The origin of man, does not deal with man's origin as an individual as God created man in his image and likeness 'male and female created he then' The idea of relationship among individuals is coextensive with the very idea of man himself. So, the biblical concept incorporates a nexus of human relationship. Milton subscribed to the Puritan ideology in which woman is considered a "helpmeet, as a junior partner in the household which contemporaries saw as little church little school." (Haller 306-307) Milton writes in the Divorce Pamphlets that the man woman relationship transcends from God, and the communion of fellowship and union in love which are obtained in husband-wife relationship is frequently compared with man's communion with Christ. Marriage comes closest to this union. In the Tetrachordan, Milton says that marriage is the nearest resemblance in our union with Christ. (98) He feels that quality of love in all true marriages is similar in intensity to that of Christ and his church "...In marriage, there ought not only to be a civil love, but such love as Christ loves his church." (192)

Considering Milton's personal marital problems with his first wife Mary Powell and the strict regulations surrounding divorce, it is not surprising that marriage and divorce were issues of importance for Milton. In seventeenth-century England marriage was perceived as a sacrament, which meant that the union was practically indissoluble except on grounds of adultery. The family was considered as a secure foundation of society and the patriarchs role was equivalent to God and the king in the state. In the *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, Milton views marriage as the blissful condition that it was at the beginning and it is pure influence of peace and love, whereof the soul's lawful contentment is the only fountain. (394) Milton attempts to redefine the concept of marriage by explaining what he sees as the true purpose of marriage. The laws emphasised the physical aspects of marriage, prioritising the importance of procreation, while Milton emphasises on the emotional aspects of marital union: "marriage was not ordained only for copulation" but instead the purpose of marriage is the "prevention of loneliness to the mind and the spirit of man" (153,119) Milton found emotional compatibility within marriage as the only manner to avoid loneliness and if that purpose is not achieved, it should be possible to separate, as being forced to remain in an emotionally incompatible marriage will make both partner's lives miserable.

Milton's preoccupation with hierarchy becomes apparent as he focusses on the relation between genders. Milton seems to suggest a non-hierarchical relation between husband and wife as he emphasises the importance of mutuality. The transcending portrayal of the position of marriage at the heart of contemporary society, emphatically states Milton's comprehension of the true nature of humanity and in *Paradise Lost* he provides reader with depictions of gender from a contemporary seventeenth century perspective. By re-dramatising the story of creation, Milton is able to depict humanity in its most simple and perfect form. Kristen A Pruitt has observed that Milton uses the themes of reciprocity, or the sharing of male female gifts and gender hierarchy to create an Eden where male and female are equal. (57-59) Overall, it is evident that Milton's argumentation concerning marriage and divorce is largely preoccupied with hierarchy. On the one hand his discussions of mutuality within marriage could indicate a concern for both husband and wife's happiness, thus suggesting a non-hierarchical stance.

Milton's views on issues of gender hierarchy are apparent in Adam and Eve's relationship in *Paradise Lost*. In a conventional manner he gives to man, contemplation and valour and sweet attractive grace to women. Man is responsible to God, where's she is bound in duty to him. Milton while assigning to them these roles is in conformity with the seventeenth century view, but the individualist in him slightly tones down the effect in the line 'He for God only, she for God in him.' Milton cautiously presents the picture of perfect friendliness and companionship, lest the expression 'she for God in him' should indicate the superiority of Adam. Milton suggests parity between them by saying that where love is, there is self-effacement. Yet, when examining Milton's representation of gender in *Paradise Lost* it is evident that his depiction of the relation between genders is not straightforward. The poem represents mutuality, but also frequently uses the language of hierarchy. There are various moments at which Eve seems to deviate from the limitations that her inferior rank would require, possibly suggesting an inversion of hierarchy.

The emotional compatibility and mutual happiness that Milton has argued in his divorce tracts is apparent in Adam and Eve's relationship. The conversation that the couple engages in Book IV are an important aspect of their relationship, and they both evidently express gratitude and love towards each other. It includes a combination of expressions of equality and adherence to hierarchy. Adam addresses Eve as his "sole partner" with whom he can equally share his experience of living in Eden by working together as companions: "were it toilsome, yet with thee were sweet" (IV.439). In his first speech to Eve, Adam does not include any sense of inequality, as is emphasised by his manner of describing that God "raised from the dust and placed us here" (IV.416). Eve on the other hand, points out her secondary creation and the

resulting inequality between them: “O thou from whom / And from whom I was formed flesh of thy flesh, / And without whom am to no end, my guide / And head” (IV.440-442). Diane Mc Colley in her *Milton’s Eve* expounds that Milton’s Eve fulfils the puritan requirements with grace and gaiety; but she has lights and powers of her own that are not mere reflections of Adam’s and she was not created simply to make his life easy. Both are placed in the garden to achieve heaven by degrees of merit, and the good for which Eve is joined to Adam include not only delight but all the the offices of piety and civil fellowship. (48)

Milton’s *Paradise Lost* has occurrences where gender hierarchy is seemingly inverted. Eve has been taught in Book IV that “beauty is excelled by manly grace / And wisdom”, Adam reverses this order of importance in Book VIII and admits to Raphael that, even though he is the strong and superior one, Eve’s beauty constitutes a weakness in him and seems to elevate her to a superior level. Adam knows that Eve is “in outward show / Elaborate, of inward less intact”, the degree of Eve’s beauty gives her a sense of superiority: “so absolute she seems / And in herself complete, so well to know / Her own, that what she wills to do or say, / Seems wisest virtourest, discreetest, best” (VIII.538-539; 547-550). Adam, therefore, cannot be complete without Eve, yet Eve is described here with language that suggests not only superiority but also a sense of autonomy (Schoenfeldt 371). Raphael admonishes Adam for not adhering to his superior rank and insists on the necessity of adherence to the traditional gender hierarchy (Miller 155). Even though Adam is reminded of his authoritative role, there are also instances where Eve herself does not seem to fully conform to her supposed inferiority. Milton’s whole epic seems to be affirming the fact that Man is able to stand, though free to fall. So, it was necessary to demonstrate that Eve is capable, independent, freely thinking individual.

Stella. P. Revard has observed that “Milton resists giving us an Eve who yields to Satan because she is intellectually and morally unable to reply to him. By adding a scene of dialogue with Adam on the very day that Eve meets the serpent, Milton demonstrates that Eve could have used her reason to engage in fruitful debate and to carry her own arguments against the serpent by applying the same skills she has used in debate with her husband. Adam also tries to make Eve stay with him, but it is not because he regards her as his inferior who cannot resist Satan by herself. On the contrary, he just says, that they are together, it is easier to evade Satan’s temptation. Adam says “hopeless to circumvent us joined where each / To other speedy aid might lend at need” (IX.259-260). Adam’s word is far from patriarchal power which would force his wife to obey him. He does not have the right to violate Eve’s autonomy to go alone and to force her to stay with him against her will. Adam shows his respect for Eve’s autonomy as well as for the God, by exercising the God’s principle by himself. Mc Colley observes that

“they are working out a harmony that Milton argued for in the church, which was composed of concord in things essential to salvation and a congruous variety in everything else.” (174) Adam seems to suggest the benefits of mutual dependency in order to avoid temptation. He can guide her, but not command her, as he says “force upon free will hath here no place.” (IX.1174) Therefore, even though Adam could have commanded her, his explanation emphasises the importance of willing submission to authority, instead of being forced.

Despite the secondary status assigned to her in the hierarchy, Eve seems to desire a certain degree of autonomy. Eve’s final speech, can be seen as an important aspect concerning gender hierarchy, and her redemptive affirmation shows a role of leadership (McGrath 72). The fact that Eve’s final speech emphasises her individuation and intelligence challenge the association of Eve with the inferiority that would be expected when adhering to the traditional hierarchy (McGrath 74). Milton uses the disputation in separation scene not to show Eve’s weakness but her strengths. He demonstrates that she can freely know, will and maintain, against opposition, a stance she defines independently. Other than the final scene there are many instances that emphasise her intelligence and independence. For example, the manner in which Eve obtains her knowledge about salvation differs from Adam in several respects. It is suggested that Eve obtains her knowledge through a dream more intuitively than Adam.

Even after the Fall, Adam still does not fully seem to adhere to the principles of gender hierarchy which Raphael had tried to inculcate in him. As a result, Adam’s inability to fully perceive Eve as inferior makes it difficult for him to comprehend her transgression: “O fairest of Creation, last and best / Of all God’s works, creature in whom excelled (IX.896-897) When Adam explains his disobedience, it is evident that his transgression is result of his failure to perceive himself as autonomous and following Eve’s lead instead. The appropriate punishment for the disobedience is return to the adherence to a rigid gender hierarchy: “to thy husband’s will / Thine shall submit, he over thee shall rule” (X.195-196) However, the poem illustrates that this seeming restoration of gender hierarchy is not good, as Adam begins to acknowledge his own responsibility for the Fall, instead of letting Eve to take on the whole blame. Overall, it can be said that Milton’s representation of gender is ambivalent and complex and does not include a straightforward adherence to hierarchy. In Milton’s works there is a representation of mutuality between genders that coexists with the traditional gender hierarchy as well as a deviation from this order.

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