

Paradise Lost. As an Epic ①

John Milton is certainly one of the greatest English Poets. His greatness mainly rests on his Paradise Lost, composed in a classical tradition. An epic poem is a narrative poem that relates the heroic exploits of some person, or an age or an idea of great importance in an exalted and grand style. 'Paradise Lost' is built on the foundation of Christian theology. Milton has conceived and executed his grand scheme in the design of Homer's 'Iliad' and Virgil's 'Aeneid'. He strictly adheres to the rules and conventions of epic poetry expounded by Aristotle. However, his genius for originality and literary innovations asserts itself from time to time.

Just like the classical poets, Milton begins with the ^{statement of the} themes of his work and invokes the Muse for help. Homer begins Odyssey by asking the Muse to sing of the wanderings of the long-suffering Odysseus. Virgil opens the 'Aeneid' with the words 'Arma virumque cano'. Similarly, in the 'Paradise Lost' Milton asks the 'Heavenly Muse' to sing.

"Of Man's first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,
Sing heavenly Muse."

M.A. HAQUE

The 'Heavenly Muse' is not the pagan Muses of Homer and Virgil, but the goddess of astronomy, a fitting choice for a poem leading up to Heaven. She is localized not on Mount Olympus or Mount Helicon, but on the 'secret top' of Oreb or Sinai. Milton requests her to lead him higher than 'Aonian Mount', of his classical poets, for his subject is higher than theirs. His prayer, then turns to the 'Holy Spirit':-

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And chiefly Thou, O Spirit, that dost prefer
Before all temples the upright heart and pure,
Instruct me, for thou know'st."

A few lines later, he again begs for light.

"What in me is dark"

Illumine, what low raise and support
That to the height of this great argument
I may assert eternal providence,

And justify the way of God to men"

Here, it is clear that "Man's first disobedience" is the theme of the poem. Milton entrusts the heavenly Muse to enable him to deal with the most profound problem, to justify the ways of God to men.

According to the classical theory and practice, the theme of an epic must be of national import. Homer presents the life style of the Greeks and Virgil portrays the national life of the Romans. But Milton's theme has a universality of appeal. It has a wider scope and larger significance. It deals with the whole human race and affects the destiny of all humanity. Again in exact conformity to the classical precept, Milton begins with a description of Satan and his host, lying stupefied on the lake of fire in Hell. How they fell from the Heaven is explained in subsequent books.

M.A. HAQUE

Paradise Lost is essentially the story of human action, though in this respect it differs from the classical epics. There are only two mortal characters in the poem but the whole story centres on their fall. Their act of disobedience is the central theme of the poem. The following lines, describing this central action form the climax.

"Her rash hand in evil hour

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Forth reaching to the fruit, she plucked, she eat
Earth felt the wound, and Nature from her seat
Sighing through all her works, gave signs of woe
That all was lost

These lines form the axis around which the whole poem revolves. All other events are but preludes or postludes to this central action. Such a treatment of the subject makes the action of the 'Paradise Lost' one entire and great, thus meeting another demand of the classical epic.

The 'Paradise Lost' is replete with Milton's classical learnings, classical allusions and Homeric similes. Here, a person, image or event is presented in terms of a person, image or event in other work of art or literature. When Milton introduces us to the monstrous size of Satan, the comparisons are not with the objects of Nature or persons encountered in personal experience, but with grave figures of classical mythology and Biblical history. For Satan, he says, is

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" in bulk as huge

As whom the fables name of monstrous size
Titianian or Earth-born, that warred on Jove
Briareos or Typhon "

When Milton wants to give us a glimpse of the multitude of the fallen angels that lay stupefied on the burning lake, the comparison is with a famous story of Old Testament. The reference is to the passage of Israelites through the Red Sea, perished by Pharaoh whose army was destroyed by the waves that closed behind the chosen people.

In order to bring out the exquisite beauty of the garden of Eden, Milton's comparisons are

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drawn from the world of classical legends, with the 'fair field of Innis' and the 'sweet grove of Daphne'.

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"..... nor that sweet grove of Daphne by Orontes, and the inspired Castalian Spring, might with this Paradise of Eden strive"

Thus, saturated with classical learnings and erudite phrases, elaborate in construction, with a highly latinized vocabulary, Milton's style achieves a unique effect of dignity and sublimity. The subliminal style, required for a classical epic, is also there.

Thus, we see that the Paradise Lost is an epic written in a classical framework. It deals with the fall of man and justification of God's ways to man.