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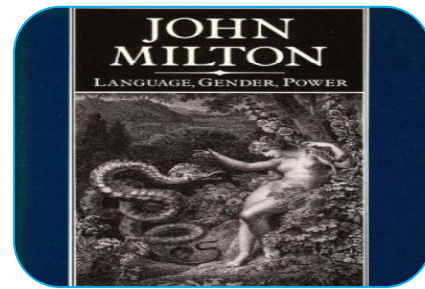
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## GENDER ISSUE IN JOHN MILTON: A REAPPRAISAL OF POET'S PERCEPTION

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### ABSTRACT:

Analyzing John Milton's works, one can observe the influence of his personal life, his biography upon his poetry and prose. There is no second opinion about its greatness, in the sublimity of thought and the majesty of expression, in the profundity of feeling and the range of imagination. Milton, in his works, not only demonstrates the social and political issues of his own society, but he also deals with the gender issue by creating female characters who have some weaknesses or faults, which cause destruction and disaster. John Milton's self-centered personality, is revealed in his writing, particularly in his depiction of marriage and his patriarchal views. His advocacy for men's right to divorce their wives on the grounds of adultery, and his belief in punishing women who commit adultery more harshly than men can be seen in his book "The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce". In his work "Paradise Lost," Milton promotes a misogynistic agenda that surpasses even his seventeenth-century patriarchy. He employs literary devices, such as language manipulation and mythology modification, to undermine notions of female creativity, competency, equality, and superiority. Milton consistently positions women below men or in the shadows, depicting them as reflections or lesser images of males at best and nonentities or ciphers at worst. The language used in "Paradise Lost" is stereotypical and diminutive toward Eve. The purpose of this article is in no way to defame his worldwide reputation but to consider the impact of his negative attitude towards women in society during his current days or in future. Some examples mainly from Paradise Lost is intended to be assembled here for the purpose.



**KEYWORDS:** Patriarchy, Misogyny, Submission, Temptation, Weakness and Objectification.

### MISOGYNY DEFINITION:

The word misogyny is a neologism coined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her essay "The Epistemology of the Closet." It alludes to misandry, a negative reference to androgyny, viewed as a threat to patriarchy because it threatens the masculine role as protector and provider. The Oxford English Dictionary notes that this comes from "a supposed charge of misogyny, or hatred of women made by a Frenchman." This is not called misogyny per se; it is closer to the dictionary definition of "misogyny" which is "the dislike, contempt or prejudice against women".

### 17TH-CENTURY SOCIETY

In this period English society was heavily patriarchal, and women held a subordinate role to men. Women were primarily seen as wives and mothers, and their social status and opportunities were largely determined by their marital status and the wealth and status of their husbands. Women were

not allowed to vote, own property, or inherit from their families, and their education was limited to domestic skills like cooking, sewing, and childcare. Women were also expected to adhere to strict social norms regarding behavior, dress, and conduct, and any deviation from these norms was met with social ostracism and criticism. Despite these limitations, some women were able to carve out a space for themselves, particularly in the fields of literature and religion, but their achievements were often overlooked or minimized due to their gender.

1. "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." - Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). This famous opening line of the novel highlights the social expectations and pressure placed on women to marry in order to secure financial stability and social status.
2. "A woman hath no other lawfull calling to be of weight and repute, but only in the domestical office." - William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties* (1622). This quote from a popular 17th century manual on household management emphasizes the limited scope of women's roles and the expectation that they should focus solely on domestic duties.
3. "Inferior in power, subordinate in position, woman in the seventeenth century was, moreover, expected to remain quiescent, content to tend her children, serve her husband, and submit to male authority in all things." - Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (1977). This quote from a modern historical analysis highlights the social expectations and limitations placed on women in the 17th century.
4. "If a woman have a good wit, and good parts, and can turn them to the advantage of mankind, she hath as much right to them as a man." - Margaret Cavendish, *The Blazing World* (1666). This quote from a work of 17th century literature by a female author challenges the prevailing attitudes toward women's intellectual abilities and potential.

**Personal element:** Milton was an extremely self-centered man. So, he revealed himself in all his work, whether he was writing an elegy or a masque an epic or a drama. Coleridge says that ' John Milton is in every line of *Paradise Lost*:' In both its theme and its style '*Paradise Lost*' is an expression of Milton's personality, his thought, his scholarship and his moral religious and political views. Milton was an extremely self-centered man. So, he revealed himself in all his work, whether he was writing an elegy or a masque an epic or a drama. Milton's own failures in marital life and his miseries after his marriages made him pay attention to the conflicts between partners in marriage. It reveals that Milton suggests divorce for men if they lead an unhappy, distressed and unbearable life with their wives. In Milton's words, unless they end their marriage, it will result in metaphorical death or 'disheartening of life. Coleridge says that ' John Milton is in every line of *Paradise Lost*:' In both its theme and its style '*Paradise Lost*' is an expression of Milton's personality, his thought, his scholarship and his moral religious and political views.

**Patriarchal views:** Man controlled society is the superb deterrent to ladies' headway and advancement. Notwithstanding contrasts in degrees of mastery the wide standards continue as before, i.e., men are in charge. Male centric foundations and social relations are answerable for the mediocre or optional status of ladies and makes snags for ladies to go ahead in the public eye. Man controlled society alludes to the male mastery both out in the open and confidential circles. In *Paradise Lost* Milton advances a misogynistic agenda that exceeds his own seventeenth-century patriarchy--and all previous patriarchal systems--in its denigration of the feminine. Milton's paradigm exceeds patriarchal subordination of women in its annihilation of positive, creative female forces and in making the entire gender suspect at best. Milton also idealizes the portrayal of women by attributing them merely the domestic issues and by stressing that they should deal with the household and obey their husbands, in a word, the females exist for satisfying the males, hence Eve's creation for Adam, as a remedy of his loneliness also justifies the secondary position of women in front of men ; as a result the male-domination, the superiority of patriarch dominate Milton's work as recognized in Adam's words: "for nothing lovelier can be found. In Woman, then to study household good, And good works in her

Husband to promote" (IX 232-34) "leave not the faithful side That gave thee being, still shades thee and protects. The Wife, where danger or dishonour lurks, Safest and seemliest by her Husband stays, Who guards her, or with her the worst endures". (IX 265-69)

**Literary weapons:** Milton's extensive arsenal of literary devices is employed in the construction of his misogynistic paradigm which is aimed at the undermining of all notions of female creativity, competency, equality, or superiority. These literary devices include, but are not limited to, manipulation and modification of language (denotations, connotations, etymology, puns, tropes, syntax, literary and scriptural allusions), modification of classic mythology (omitting positive females and emphasizing negative females, changing the gender of positive female forces), assigning the female gender to weak or inferior gender-neutral creation elements, and associating females with negative or dubious imagery (dark, shadow, indistinct surroundings and low or level stations). The phallogocentric language of the patriarchy does not suffice for Milton. Milton's misogynistic paradigm requires a new language totally devoid of beneficent female archetypes, a language that nullifies or vilifies the female. Milton consistently positions women below men or in the shadows. They are depicted as reflections or lesser images of males at best and nonentities or ciphers at worst. It is Milton's consistent and unbalanced degradation of women via allusions, physical positioning, and revision or deletion of positive female archetypes that warrants the label of misogynist. Milton begins construction of his misogynistic paradigm with that smallest unit of language, the word. He selects words that have many denotations, connotations, and allusions; hence, words amenable to a plethora of possible interpretations. When puns, tropes, and confusing syntax are added to the multitude of possible meanings of a given word, language itself becomes questionable and susceptible to Milton's determination of correct meaning. The language used in *Paradise Lost* is stereotypical and diminutive toward Eve, who is compared to a lesser creature: "the serpent" (book 1); "his wife" (3); "her mother" (4).

**Portrayal of Eve:** The story of Adam and Eve, found in the Bible, is one of the most widely known and widely debated stories in human history. For centuries, the story has been interpreted to portray Eve as weak and subservient to Adam, making her a symbol of female weakness and subservience in the Christian tradition. The misogyny becomes evident in Milton's depiction of Eve's subsequent attempt to persuade Adam to eat the fruit. In Milton's perspective, because Eve has the ability to think for herself, she naturally becomes a manipulating, untrustworthy creature who lets her pride cause her to give into the temptation that she was strictly warned against. Milton wants to undermine Eve by telling her that she needs to stay with Adam because he is superior. Eve is depicted as being weaker and more prone to temptation than Adam, which perpetuates the idea of women as being intellectually and morally inferior to men. This view is often referred to as a "misogynistic paradigm."

"Whence true authority in men; though both  
Not equal, as their sex not equal seemed;  
For contemplation he and valour formed,  
For softness she and sweet attractive grace;  
He for God only, she for God in him.  
His fair large Front and Eye sublime declared  
Absolute rule;" (IV 295-301)

It is obvious from above that inequality between Eve and Adam dominates the lines, as a consequence of which Milton's misogyny comes to fore.

Satan goes on to describe that Adam is for God, and Eve is for Adam. This description emphasizes that

Eve does not have a connection to God, and is spiritually of lesser value. If Eve is not connecting

to God like Adam, then her spiritual inequality makes her more susceptible to sin.

While authority, intelligence, and absolute rule belong to Adam; softness and attractiveness define Eve, in other words not mental but physical qualities of Eve are emphasized. In this manner, by means of Eve, Milton portrays women as acquiring just physical beauty and men as possessing mental superiority, so men and women are not demonstrated as equal.

Eve accepts Adam's superiority, leadership, and his mental power, without which she cannot find the right way, the light as seen along these lines:

"O thou for whom  
And from whom I was formed flesh of thy flesh,  
And without whom am to no end, my Guide  
And Head, what thou hast said is just and right." (IV 440-43)

It is clear that Eve does not hesitate to stress that she is bound to Adam since she comes from his flesh, so without him, she is not strong enough to survive, which shows that Adam, in other words, the male, is the one who controls, guides and dominates the female; He describes Eve as a temptress, and blames her for Adam's sin.

**Discriminated women with stereotypical role :** Milton believed that they were inferior and less intelligent than men, and as such he only supported women in "secretarial duties", to be respected but not as equals in society. He believed that women's role in society was to be wives and mothers, and that their greatest duty was to satisfy their husbands' needs; they should obey their husbands and not seek independence, either through education or career. He had a negative view on women, claiming she is a "childishly foolish and silly creature", as well as calling women "superfluous". He declared that they were created to obey men (superior beings), and inherit men's powers over them (such as rulership in marriage).

Milton saw women as being vulnerable. He believed that women needed to be married to protect them from the dangers of wandering around unprotected. This leads one to believe that Milton used the creation story as means of justifying his current views of women. He believed that women had less intelligence than men and therefore should be treated as property. While on a tour of the women's college at Oxford, he said that "women were born to be commanded: All but one."

He believed that women were ruled by their emotions and irrational behavior, and further believed that they had no intellectual capacity, lack the rational mind to make decisions based on reason rather than emotion. He subscribed to the belief that women are incapable of reason and logic, thus making them suitable as subordinates. He disapproved of women's education, considered them too emotional and prone to sin, he viewed them as weaker than men and more likely to fall victim to temptation. In Milton's view of women, they should be like the biblical Eve and passive, caring mothers while men were active in industry, politics and war. He complained about how women are by nature inferior to men, so that women should be kept in their place and have no say in public affairs.

**Samson Agonistes:** Firstly, it is worth noting that Milton's portrayal of women in *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes* has been the subject of much critical discussion. As Debora Shuger notes in her book, *The Renaissance Bible: Scholarship, Sacrifice, and Subjectivity*, "the misogyny of *Paradise Lost* is a familiar topic of critical inquiry" (Shuger 135). Similarly, in his book, *The Gendered Palimpsest: Women, Writing, and Representation in Early Christianity*, Steven F. Kruger writes that "Milton's attitude toward women has been controversial from the beginning" (Kruger 125).

Regarding the specific portrayal of women in *Samson Agonistes*, a number of scholars have pointed out the negative depiction of Dalila in the text. For instance, in her article "The Portrayal of Women in Milton's *Samson Agonistes*," Ayse Koseoglu argues that "Dalila, as a female character, who is depicted as a wicked and unfaithful woman" (Köseoğlu 106). Similarly, in his book, *Milton and the Drama of History: Historical Vision, Iconoclasm, and the Literary Imagination*, David Loewenstein notes

that "Dalila in Samson Agonistes is as negative a portrayal of women as Eve is in Paradise Lost" (Loewenstein 224).

The depiction of women in Samson Agonistes has also been linked to Milton's personal life and experiences. For example, in his article "Milton's Samson and the Feminine Betrayal of Domestic Bliss," Michael Lieb argues that "the marital troubles that Milton experienced in his own life" are reflected in the text, particularly in the character of Dalila. Similarly, in her book, Reading Milton's Eve, Regina M. Schwartz suggests that Milton's portrayal of women in his works is influenced by his own "tortured relationships with women".

In addition to these critical interpretations, it is also possible to find evidence within the text itself to support the claim that Milton portrays women in a negative light. For instance, in Samson's speech quoted in the original passage, he refers to women as "every woman false like thee" and accuses them of "break[ing] all faith, all vows, deceive, betray" (Samson Agonistes 748-50). This kind of blanket condemnation of an entire gender certainly suggests a negative view of women on the part of the author.

Overall, then, it is clear that the portrayal of women in Samson Agonistes is a subject of controversy and has been interpreted by many scholars as evidence of Milton's misogyny. While some critics may dispute this interpretation or argue for a more nuanced view of Milton's attitude toward women, the evidence presented above suggests that this is a valid and well-supported reading of the text.

### **The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce:**

"Why should any man be stuck with a wife who has committed adultery, when he can divorce her and move on with his life? It is unfair to force a man to remain in a loveless marriage simply because his wife has been unfaithful." (Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce, Book 2, Chapter 9)

Critics argue that this quote shows Milton's disregard for the emotional and psychological well-being of women, and his belief that men have the right to divorce their wives without taking into account the reasons behind the adultery, or the consequences of the divorce for the wife and any children involved.

"A man may not divorce his wife for any trivial reason, but only for something as serious as adultery. This is because adultery strikes at the very foundation of the marriage covenant, which is fidelity and trust." (Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce, Book 2, Chapter 6)

Critics argue that this quote shows Milton's emphasis on the importance of fidelity in marriage, but also his narrow view of what constitutes a serious enough reason for divorce. This view suggests that women are only valuable to men as long as they remain faithful and loyal, and that their worth as wives is based solely on their sexual purity.

"A man may divorce his wife if she is barren, because it is not in the nature of marriage to be without children." (Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce, Book 2, Chapter 12)

Critics argue that this quote shows Milton's lack of empathy for women who are unable to have children, and his belief that a wife's primary role in marriage is to bear children. This perspective is seen as evidence of Milton's misogyny, as it reduces women to reproductive vessels and denies their worth as individuals outside of their ability to bear children.

Overall, while Milton's arguments in "The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce" may have been reflective of the societal norms and beliefs of his time, they are often seen by modern critics as evidence of his inherent misogyny and lack of empathy for women.

In "The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce," Milton advocates for the legalization of divorce and argues that men should have the right to divorce their wives on the grounds of adultery. He writes:

"For why should there be any distinction of divorce betwixt adultery and other heinous transgressions, but because adultery is only that sin which, of all others, destroys the comfort of human life, and, without which, matrimony is not violated, nor the marriage covenant disannulled?" (Chapter 1, Section 1)

Milton further argues that women who commit adultery should be punished severely:

"I am of opinion that it [adultery] ought to be punished by some penal law; but, so as not to make it capital, unless it be the second offence, or at least the third; and that the punishment, whensoever it is inflicted, should be equal to that which is inflicted upon the man; that is, divorce, and the forfeiture of the dowry and half the goods." (Chapter 1, Section 12)

These passages have been cited by critics as evidence of Milton's misogyny, as they suggest that he believes women who commit adultery should be punished more harshly than men. Additionally, Milton's focus on adultery as the sole grounds for divorce has been criticized as limiting women's freedom and perpetuating traditional gender roles.

### Some critics' view:

The criticism of Milton as a misogynist is a well-established viewpoint in literary studies, with scholars such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar arguing that Milton's views on women were deeply problematic. In their book *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar conclude that Milton's views on women were "consistently masculinist" and that his idea of a companionate marriage was not feminist (Martin "Introduction" 4).

Critics have pointed to Milton's own personal experiences with women, such as his unhappy marriage to Mary Powell and his perceived neglect of his daughters, as evidence of his misogyny. According to Martin, these critics have argued that Milton "clearly failed to extend his concept of Christian liberty to women" and that his divorce tracts only perpetuated the battles of the sexes ("Dalila" 54).

Other scholars have pointed to specific passages in Milton's works that they see as evidence of his misogynistic views. Ziegelmann and Singh argue that while Milton seems to support the idea of companionate marriage in *Paradise Lost*, he also portrays Eve as vain and stupid (8). Additionally, Milton's emphasis on spiritual compatibility has led some critics to argue that he was seeking a "perfect Stepford-type wife" (Martin "Introduction" 8).

Critics argue that Milton's portrayal of women, particularly Eve, has been problematic for feminists throughout history. Joseph Wittreich's research shows that feminist readers in the 18th and 19th centuries were already suspicious of the "angel of the hearth" roles associated with Eve, and by the 1970s, these suspicions had turned into active disdain (Martin "Introduction" 4).

Overall, the criticism of Milton as a misogynist is a complex and multifaceted issue in literary studies, with scholars drawing on both Milton's personal life and his literary works to support their arguments.

### CONCLUSION:

This article is written entirely on the basis of secondary sources that include review of books, journals etc. Based on the evidence provided by scholars in literary studies, it can be concluded that John Milton was a misogynist. Scholars such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Elaine Showalter, and Judith King have all argued that Milton's portrayal of women in his literary works reinforces traditional gender stereotypes and reflects deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes towards women. Additionally, Milton's personal experiences with women, including his unhappy marriage to Mary Powell and his perceived neglect of his daughters, have also been used as evidence of his misogyny. These scholars have drawn on both Milton's personal life and his literary works to support their arguments, providing a convincing case that Milton held problematic attitudes towards women. Overall, the evidence suggests that John Milton cannot be viewed as a feminist writer and that his works reflect deeply problematic views on gender and sexuality.

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