

Part II

English Honours

Paper -3

Topic – Paradise Lost

Character of Satan -

According to Coleridge, “the character of Satan is pride and sensual indulgence, finding in self the sole motive of action. It is the character so often seen in little on the political stage. It exhibits all the restlessness, temerity and cunning which have marked the mighty hunters of mankind from Nimrod to Napoleon. Milton has carefully marked in his Satan the intense selfishness, the alcohol of egotism, which would rather reign in hell than serve in heaven”. Milton’s intention was to write an epic of cosmic proportions and this scheme required its characters to be impressive.

The most impressive and dramatic character in the first book of *Paradise Lost* is Satan, the great enemy of God and Man. Enmity is his role in the story and he must be made equal to his task as the fittest adversary of the omnipotent. Hence, there is an ‘epic necessity’ that he should be made sublime, exalter over the average and should be endowed with noble and heroic qualities. In Book I he is not presented as an embodiment of the principle of evil, like Shakespeare’s Iago of *Othello*. Had it been so, Satan would never have impressed us as a tragic character. In fact it was Milton’s plan to make Satan appeal to the readers as a tragic hero at the beginning. So, he is invested with an extra- ordinary, almost heroic grandeur and is projected as a mixture of good and evil, like Shakespeare’s Macbeth. Following the Aristotelian concept of tragic hero, Satan is represented by Milton as an intermediate personage. He is endowed with so many heroic qualities that Dryden and many other subsequent critics had thought that Milton actually intended to make Satan the hero of the epic. The large sympathy with which Milton treated him has also tempted many a critic to observe that Satan was actually Milton’s self projection and that through him the great poet revealed to the world: “his own proud spirit of independence and superiority to the blows of fortune”.

Satan possesses all the essential characteristics of a real hero. He is stately in appearance and his deportment is majestic. Even after his fall from heaven he stood like a tower, in shape and gesture proudly eminent and his form had still retained much of its original brightness. He is a character of indomitable, promethean spirit. Even after his defeat and downfall, his spirit is undaunted and he is determined to wage eternal war against God. His brave soul is loath to acknowledge defeat. Defeat could not curb the independence of his spirit. How brave are the words with which he infuses hope in the frustrated Beelzebub: “What though the field be lost?

/All is not lost; the unconquerable will, / And Study of revenge, immortal hate/ And courage never to submit or yield; / And what is else not to be overcome?"

Satan is a revolutionary anarchist of superhuman dimensions. He is the leader of the Angels who, at his investigation, had revolted against God. When God ordained that His son would head the host of Heavenly angels, Satan rebelled and one-third of the angelic population came over to his side. The rebels had clung to him even after they had been vanquished by God and thrown into Hell because of his strong will, firmness of purpose and above all, his indomitable courage. When Beelzebub despairs over the irredeemably hopeless situation, Satan says, "to be weak is miserable". He has self – confidence enough to believe that with strength of mind one 'can make a Heaven of Hell, and a Hell of Heaven'. Milton has supposedly projected his own spirit of independence through Satan. Satan would not sue for peace so that God might allow him and his followers to go back to Heaven. Coupled with his inordinate ambition there dwells in his heart an ardent desire for freedom and abhorrence of slavery. In his estimation it will be 'better to reign' in Hell than serve in Heaven'.

Satan is a remarkably efficient leader. His capacity for leadership is evident from the moment he breaks the 'horrid silence' with his bold words to Beelzebub. His speech beginning with 'awake, arise, or be forever fallen', addressed to his followers is considered as the most heartening call given by a commander to his defeated army. His speeches show him to be an effective demagogue and a facetious leader who appeals to the emotions and prejudices of the masses in order to win them over and thereby regain power. His powerful speeches electrify the fallen angels with fresh courage so much so that they are roused from the stupefaction. His strong personality has the charisma of an attractive leader. He is moved to tears at their pitiable condition and their ruin for which none but he himself is responsible. Indeed, there is one of the humanizing touches in the character of Satan and Shows that he has still distinctive traces of a better nature.

Satan is full of devices and his resourcefulness is worthy of a better cause. When he finds that force is not right technique to avenge on God then he tried to tease God by 'fraud and guile', and so he conceives the idea of seeking revenge upon God indirectly through man. Despite all his heroic qualities, however, Satan degenerates and he degenerates from a brave hero to a cunning, consummate villain. And it is pride which is the cause of his degeneration. He is an embodiment of obdurate pride. Self-exaltation is the motif of all his conduct. Satan says, 'We are ordained to govern, not to serve'. Out of this pride arises his 'study of revenge, immortal hate', the scorn of repentance and finally its impossibility. Even in defeat he never dreams of submission.

Commenting on the presentation of Satan's character, Hazlitt has justly observed that the fierceness of his pride. Satan's loss of infinite happiness to himself is compensated in thought by his power of inflicting misery on others. His love of power and contempt for suffering is never relaxed from the highest pitch of intensity. He expresses the sum and substance of all ambition in one life, "Fallen Cherub, to be weak is miserable, doing or suffering". He is not only proud; he is

also envious, malicious, revengeful, and crafty and has an inordinate love of evil. In fact Satan is a Machiavellian character of the Renaissance with a lust for unlimited power and not bereft of admirable qualities. But his megalomania, his intensity of self-exaltation, destroys all that is good in him. As Coleridge puts it, Milton has carefully marked in his Satan the intense selfishness, the alcohol of egotism, which would rather reign in Hell than serve in Heaven. But around the character he has thrown in singularity of daring, grandeur of sufferance and a revived splendor which constitute the very height of sublimity.

Thus, in the first book of *Paradise Lost* Satan is presented as a mixed character made up of evil passions and heroic qualities. The agony which he feels at the thought of the ruin in which he has involved his followers proves that the remnants of good have not yet died down in him. Milton is quite conscious of what he intends to do with Satan and neither consciously he is 'of the Devil's party'. "Satan's magnificent vitality", Douglas Bush rightly observes, "inspires and artistically necessary degree of imaginative response while as a being dedicated to evil, he inspires profound aversion because he has a conscience and he contains tragic potentialities, but these, in conflict with absolute good, are not allowed fulfillment."

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