

# The feminist discourse in book ix of paradise lost

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



Milton's construction of Eve in *Paradise Lost* is beset with dithering ambiguity, with her identity being defined and redefined within. The text has been construed during the Restoration, on the backdrop of the libertine culture and the increasingly active social role of women. Women's identities were being redefined, in terms of their virtue and 'use' value while their autonomy was being questioned. Milton's portrayal of Eve has been touted both anti and proto-feminist, often derived from her interactions with Adam and later, Satan. Questions about her autonomy as a 'reasoning' self constantly under the 'gaze' in a masculine ethos are thrashed out in the epic, with the ambiguities being highlighted in Book 9. Milton's Eve is quite different from her Bible counterpart, for here, her character is allowed much visual and discursive space, with focusing on her evolving sexuality and the resulting effects. This essay will attempt to sketch Eve's interaction with the existing masculine power structures while actively engaging with the notions of 'Choice', 'Responsibility' and 'Control'. Moreover, it will try to figure out the evolving ambiguities from within and analyse whether Eve's becoming a woman is overtly a proto-feminist representation or not.

Any claim of misogyny or proto-feminism in *Paradise Lost* has to be analysed in the context of the text's historical background. Seeking to justify the ways of God to men, Milton posits numerous religious and social constructs up for scrutiny, while tracing out the various changes that occur. The Restoration was embedded in the economy of exchange, with its essential components, sex and sexuality acquiring new meanings as historical constructs. Situated amidst the popular libertine culture, the ideals of love, desire, virtue and more importantly, the image of the woman was being redrawn, with her

sexuality and resulting autonomy being redefined. Dithering ambiguity ruled over the question of the ownership of a woman's body, be it a virgin or a whore. The power structures within the Restoration society were gradually changing due to the heavily influential trading economy and the transformed 'gaze'. It has also been contended that this period saw the rise of repression against sexuality, on the backdrop of the rise of capitalism and the resulting incitement to discourse about it. At this juncture stood Milton, writing a religious epic, but absorbing and being affected by the reigning cultural forces. It has to be determined what a proto-feminist attitude in this period would entail; whether it would merely mean attacking patriarchy and capitalism, while conforming to the patriarchal structures or redefining the woman's position therein, aiming for a balanced, if not equal position.[1] Also, it is doubtful whether the incitement to discourse with acknowledging the submissive position of women and humungous spatial allocation is itself proto-feminist.

To look at Milton's construction of Eve, this essay will attempt to posit the two contradicting constructions, before and after the dream and the connections existing between them. The first step to such an analysis would be to observe the power structures existing between Adam and Eve, which is identified in Book 4. In between their conversations, Adam reminds Eve about their oath to God, of never even approaching the Tree of Knowledge or partaking of its fruit. In return, they had been conferred power over all other living beings and had been given a huge dominion to rule over. Eve passively submits[2], positing Adam as her guide and head, from whose flesh she was made. Whatever Adam says is just and right as he is the god-figure for her.

She seems to prefer active ignorance and blind belief than questioning the commands, as she herself admits.[3] However, such humility, if it can be called so and passive submission doesn't ring true with Eve's character later into the text.

Eve's submission to Adam's supreme authority is challenged quite soon with the incident regarding her reflection. Many inferences have been drawn out of this incident, the reflection being a metaphor for how women's identities exist. At first, Eve doesn't recognise herself, having never seen her reflection even once and believes the voice which says it is her reflection, an image of Adam's. This can be read as the masculine ethos defining as a woman's body and her existence, as the Restoration exuberantly did. Eve's image is wrought out of Adam's image, however different they might seem to be. However, it is more important to look at the way she analyses Adam's image when she sees him and then, turns back to that smooth watery image, the image of the 'self'.[4] Eve, being disillusioned with the masculine created illusion turns back to look, analyse and reason with her reflection. This analytical attitude, which is evident throughout the epic, contradicts her earlier apparently submissive demeanour.

Milton's description of Eve through Adam is a measured one. The gaze is precise, looking at the woman objectively and possessively adopting her body. Adam with his love for Eve looks at her beauty and her submissive charms, as she meekly surrenders to him. The constant rhetoric of Adam being made in God's image and Eve in Adam's image only cements the visual structure of the epic, and how the power structures operate and chain

of communication is established. Any instruction by or from God is first related to Adam in isolation and later, Eve receives the masculinised version of it.[5]

The cementing of structures along with tracing out Eve's identity continues with her recitation of her dream and then, Adam's response.[6] Having spent a restless night, Eve relates her dream to Adam, vividly describing the events as they had occurred. Adam's response, while apparently comforting is of consequence, as it positions Eve on a pedestal, appropriating virtues to her. For Adam, as a woman is derived from man's rib and flesh, nothing evil can be present in her.[7] Moreover, a pure woman who abhors the act nearly committed in her dream would never dream of ever living her dream. Such stereotyping of the woman was quite popular in the Restoration, with the woman being either termed a ' virgin' or a ' whore'. Putting up the woman on the pedestal, like ' the angel in the house' [8] threatens to obliterate any autonomy present. Having been thrust into a watertight compartment, she can't do anything outside the defined parameters and so, is rendered helpless. As Adam believes, Eve won't do the act which she had abhorred in her dream. The possibility of her evaluating her dream and threshing it out with Reason doesn't exist, as he prefers to think.

The characterial construction of Eve is further expounded in Book 8 in Adam's conversations with Raphael. It encloses a narrative on the creation of man and Adam's own relationship with Eve, along with conflicting discourses on the nature of love. The conversations are often touted misogynist for their intense stereotyping and deriding of women, especially Raphael's

discourses. But, Adam's defence of his passionate love with Eve slightly redeems the text, for it posits a partially contradictory opinion to that of Raphael. Post his narrative about his creation and the resulting discourses with God, Adam speaks of how Eve was created. As a major deviation from the Bible, Adam asks for Eve, having observed other inferior beasts living with their consorts. Adam's request is specifically noted for its proto-feminist undertones, which Mary Wollstonecraft quotes in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. As for her and many others, Adam's expostulation with his Maker was an indication of the gendered contradictions present within the epic. In his argument, Adam seeks for another human of equal stature and fit to participate in all rational delight, since harmony can't be begotten in a society among unequals. He can't forever live conversing with his inferiors; as they live with each of their kinds, he requires a consort too. His consort is to be like him, like his image multiplied<sup>[9]</sup>, which also implies an equal position. Neither here nor throughout the book before the Fall or the Genesis had any hierarchy presented between Adam and Eve.<sup>[10]</sup> Though created at different intervals, they both are supposed to share the responsibility of ruling over the world and its inferior creation.

Milton's description of Eve here and later in the epic through Adam is amorous, albeit measured. Also, their relationship in terms of pre-lapsarian sexuality is quite ambiguous, which initiates the discussion between Raphael and Adam about love. In Book 8, pre-lapsarian sexuality is deemed attractive but rendered problematic too. As Adam admits, his experience of making love to Eve has revealed new qualities in her. She is beautiful, intelligent and complete, and hence worthy of being his consort. But, this statement is

contradicted by his very misogynist statement, about women having been perfectly embellished on the outside by nature, but left imperfect inside.[11] This establishes the arena for an animated debate regarding Eve and passionate love, which also underlines the misogynist diatribes enmeshed in the discourses. Moreover, Adam's responses to Raphael's arguments help construct Eve's identity more clearly.

Adam, in spasms of love, discovers Eve to be intellectually equal and dignified but realizes that her beauty weakens him. He wonders whether God had deliberately weakened him by extracting that rib to mould Eve from it. [12] But more importantly, Adam describes his passion for her and praises her radiance. This doesn't find favour with Raphael, who admonishes Adam for his blinded existence. For Adam should control his passions and not be swayed by it. He had to rein in his consort and not let her desert him, for if Adam doesn't dismiss her, she won't leave.[13] This statement assumes masculinist supremacy, which is demolished in Book 9. He even states that the value attributed to Eve by Adam is ephemeral and she wasn't worth it. [14] Further, Raphael reminds Adam that the purpose of love wasn't mere carnal pleasure, but some other transcendental purpose. Adam could admire Eve, lying enchanted in spasms of carnal pleasure, but he had to rein in his self-esteem and be rational. His desire for such carnal satisfaction could have been with any beast, but his union with Eve was to serve a greater purpose than material matters. However, Adam is only half-abashed with Raphael's reproof and defends his position on passionate love. For that had enabled him to enjoy Eve's company, mixed with love and sweet compliance since she had declared unfeigned union of mind and soul.[15] Ironically, this

itself requires the unwilling submission of the woman under a man.

Subsequently, Raphael leaves, asking Adam to take heed lest his passion sways his judgement. He had been informed of the Enemy and the impending danger, now it was being left to him to decide. If Adam let passion sway his Reason, he might transgress and thus break his oath to God. What Book 8 enables us to do is to figure out the ambiguities in Adam's creation of Eve and how material[16] his construction almost becomes.

The construction of Eve throughout the previous books culminates in Book 9, the primary focus of this essay. Eve desires to work alone, so as to save time and do more work. She then presents this idea to Adam, couched in a 'rational' discourse. It is to be hypothesised whether her desire is to be in solitude for some time, entertained by her own thoughts and herself. But, more importantly, her reasoning includes a gendering of nature and work, where winding the woodbine is for Adam while Eve spends her time amidst the spring of roses.[17] It is surprising that Eve affirms the gender boundaries which she'll soon break. Also, Eve desires for Adam to do his own work, without being obsessed with Eve and their casual discourses while working. Curiously, this is what perhaps Raphael had demanded from Adam too, to be working with Reason than succumb to passion.

Adam's mild response is possessive, harping on the domestic stereotype and trying to rein in Eve. For him, a woman studying household goods is an efficient domestic lady.[18] However, Adam and Eve had not been created for irksome toil, but to enjoy their life. Deploying Reason was paramount to enjoying life and so, their actions were reasoned. Also, Adam makes it clear



that Eve might befall any harm if she's separated from him. He fears that the enemy might attack, and so, asks her not to leave his side, since he shades and protects her. The wife remains safe if she stays with her husband for he'll protect her or endure the worst with her.[19] This has serious implications for the remainder of the epic since it nails in the forced union of the couple. Be it pleasure or pain, both of them should be experiencing it, but with the husband's supreme position as protector incarnate.

However, Eve is uncomfortable with Adam's arguments and his doubts about her intentions to go alone. Being cognizant of the Enemy, having overheard the conversations between Raphael and Adam, she tarnishes his fears since they can't be physically harmed. It was painful that Adam was suspecting her firm faith in God and love for him. But for Adam, the fear is something else, or so it seems. He desires to avoid any attempt itself by the Foe. For the Foe wouldn't dare attack the both of them together, but he might attack Eve alone.[20] Eve isn't perturbed and she exposes Adam's fears as naïve and unreasonable. She doesn't want to live in fear of the Foe; their faith in God and love for each other will have to survive both the test of time and the attack of the enemy.[21] Moreover, any insecurity was purported as threatening to derail their relationship, which Eve desired not. At this juncture, Adam supports suspending Reason and blindly following God's instructions. Reason can be mislead and can lead to a dangerous venture, which should be avoided at any cost. It is interesting that Adam who earlier admired Reason in Eve is perhaps disgruntled with it since it runs contrary to his position. He again reaffirms his role as the protector incarnate, desiring Eve to stay with him, by which she can battle temptation. But finally, he

allows her to leave but emphasises on her God-granted free will, which attributes responsibility to her for her own actions.[22] Now was the time for Eve to prove her loyalty, with her actions when she's alone. Eve then leaves, but with Adam's permission as she herself admits.[23] It is to be wondered whether this is a discursive submission to authority, forced by the masculinistic structures or a statement, which tries to evade responsibility for the fall in the future by referring to Adam as having given permission.[24] This can be connected to Raphael's comment about how Eve won't desert him unless he dismisses her. Though it is Eve's arguments that barely convince Adam to let her go, it seems the responsibility is being thrown back at Adam's court again. Eve thus leaves, withdrawing her hand from her husband's hand[25] and going out alone. Her reasoning has won over Adam's passionate belief, it seems.

As she leaves, the 'gaze' returns, with both Adam and Satan as the agents. For Adam, he only desired her to stay or, at least, return quickly, but Satan's gaze is calculating, and almost lustful.[26] This is the archetype of the Restoration male gaze, rendering the woman's body the position of an object in the exchange economy. Even during the temptation, Satan refers to how he gazes at her with reverence, which is the primary feature of the commodity market. His visual analysis is nothing but the sensuous and measured gaze of a trader perhaps, which sets the tone for the fraudulent temptation to begin. Eve's temptation by Satan, masquerading as the serpent occurs on a similar plane, as a conflict within power dialectics. Satan's approaching as a serpent itself is a clever move since it removes any fear of insecurity from Eve's mind, for who would be afraid of an inferior

being. Moreover, Satan appeals to her sense of reasoning, feeding her pride and deceiving her discursively. She, who was beautiful shouldn't be just admired by one man, but be revered as a goddess among gods, adored and served by a train of angels.[27] Narrating his own experience, Satan appeals to her to use her reason, for she should be aspiring to be godhead. This verbal conflict running into some 200 lines is between equals with both Eve and Satan laying claim to Reason as the base for their arguments. While Eve professes that 'our reason is our law'[28] and so, they couldn't eat from the Tree, Satan mocks her hypocritical stance, for, by Reason, they should be questioning the vague commandment issued. Eve falls not only for the divine existence promised but for Satan's reasoned arguments and perhaps, in desire for the company of an intellectually competent being. For, throughout Book 9, Adam had been behaving like a moron, while Eve has been arguing rationally for her rights to go out alone.

Eve falls with the partaking of the fruit, overwhelmed by Satan's reasoned discourse. Just after her fall, she ponders over the next step, believing herself to have gained knowledge and experience but the question of Adam remained. Adam's queries, still not fallen would have to be satisfied beyond doubt. Eve fiddles with the idea of retaining the odds of knowledge in her power with herself.[29] To do so would ensure that she becomes equal to Adam in position or perhaps, superior to him. At this juncture, Eve is unabashedly voicing her desire for superiority, for who is free as an inferior being. This is a desire for redefining of identities and the reversal of roles in the existing power structure, and a debunking of the stereotyping of women into categories. Eve, though fallen aspires for a greater existence though a

bleak future awaits her. She is calculating her moves here, if the fruit begets happiness, she might share it with Adam, though the possibility is remote. But, if the fruit begets death, she'll for sure share it with him, for she can't bear to see him wedded to another Eve. Though she admits to being non-existent without him, what is highlighted is Eve's calculated aspirations to improve her existence. This section is what pushes Milton into the limelight as being proto-feminist in his rendering of Eve, as not blandly chastising her for the Fall, but engaging in a reasoned discourse with her. The fall is fortunate, for Eve desires to use her position well and reap benefits, thus replicating the Renaissance humanist model.

Post the fall, Adam's conversations with Eve posit an emotionally propelled being to the front since he professes to loving Eve dearly and would not be able to live without her. She had fallen and since he can't be separated from her, he was going to fall too. Adam voluntarily partakes of the fruit, well cognizant of its implications and so falls. At this moment, the narrative tone, presumably Milton's voice seems to be chastising Adam for his decision since he was fondly overcome with female charm[30] and not directed by Reason. This seems to be a flawed argument since Adam weighs in the possibilities after Eve's falls and then decides to fall too. Later, the blame game begins, with Eve being held responsible for their fall by Adam. He declaims her for having deserted his side without heeding his advice, and giving free rein to her desire of perhaps exploring new ventures. Eve contradicts his every claim, shifting the responsibility back to Adam. Adam should have commanded her absolutely not to leave, which he refutes as an impossible task since force on free will has no place in Paradise.[31] Adam bewails the

fact that he had given into admiring Eve and so had been betrayed by her. It seems as if this verbal battle has been won by Eve, for yet again, her arguments aren't impassioned, but reasoned and composed. A question raised by her is quite valid, as to whether the woman is never expected to part from the man. Book 9 thus ends with doubts lingering behind, regarding the position of any woman and the idea of 'responsibility' for the fall. And the book seems to provide no easy answers.

The responsibility for the fall, according to Adam is with Eve, for she stubbornly went out alone and got tempted by the serpent. Adam had nothing to do with Eve's crime than perhaps falling along with her later for his love for her. But, the text says otherwise, through the arguments voiced by Eve. Throughout the epic, Adam had been Eve's guide, as mentioned in many previous books. However, Adam has relinquished responsibility once she committed a crime and fell. Eve refutes such blame, for it could have happened even if Adam had been with her.<sup>[32]</sup> Moreover, it is to be remembered that she hadn't heard the whole message from Raphael, and had only overheard parts of it. She had been apparently ignorant, but is ignorance a blind for innocence? Perhaps not, since Milton divides the blame between the both of them. The Fall itself is *Felix Culpa*, the fortunate fall and so, their blame game only highlights their contradicting positions in the existing power structure. The text positions Eve as not the only culprit, but being a part of it. Adam seems to be foregrounding his sacrifice of Eve, of him falling along with her, as being an unworthy sacrifice, since she seems to upbraid him for her transgression. Also, his position further foregrounds how

the masculinist society presumes supremacy and derives dependency from women, the very condition which Eve resists.

Milton's construction of Eve in Paradise Lost is thus beset with multiples complexities, along with the defining and redefining of her identity throughout. There is a restructuring of gender roles in the text, with the idea of female subjugation in a masculine ethos well explored. Questions about Eve's autonomy as a 'reasoning' self constantly under the 'gaze' are thrashed out and the resulting ambiguities highlighted. In relation to this, the notions of 'Choice' and 'Responsibility' are analysed in context of the Fall along with their gendered connotations. Though Adam and Satan's masculine insinuations along with Milton's chastising voice have been touted misogynist, Eve's characterial ascension is perhaps a proto-feminist streak. For Eve is allowed much visual and discursive space, with focusing on her evolving sexuality and the resulting effects. She doesn't merely attack patriarchy for their hypocritical stance, but also redefines her position within the masculinistic structure, aiming for a balanced, if not equal position. Also, the incitement to discourse acknowledging the submissive position of women is followed by humungous spatial allocation for Eve's construction as a character in Book 9, which traces out her attempts to attain autonomy and freedom from Adam. Moreover, though the ambiguities arising from within the text aren't really resolved, its representation of Eve's becoming a woman is perhaps a proto-feminist venture.

(4030 words)

Notes

<https://assignbuster.com/the-feminist-discourse-in-book-ix-of-paradise-lost/>

- Milton, John, and John Leonard. *Paradise Lost*. London: Penguin, 2003. Print.
- Lewis, C. S. “ The Fall.” *A Preface to Paradise Lost*. London: Oxford UP, 1961. 124-28. Print.
- Turner, James Grantham. “ Love Made in the First Age.” *One Flesh* (1994): 230+. Print
- Hekman, Susan. “ Feminism.” *The Routledge Companion to Critical Theory*. By Paul Wake and Simon Malpas. London: Routledge, 2006. 91-101. Print.

#### Footnotes

[1] Hekman, Susan. “ Feminism.” *The Routledge Companion to Critical Theory*. By Paul Wake and Simon Malpas. London: Routledge, 2006. 91-101. Print..

[2] IV 497-99, 635-39

[3] ‘...to know no more is woman’s happiest knowledge and her praise...’ (IV 637-38)

[4] IV 477-80

[5] Of course, she transgresses this restriction by overhearing Raphael’s conversation with Adam, by chance, or so she says.

[6] V 28-136 (Adam’s response – 99-100 & 119-21)

[7] V 99-100

[8] This term belong to the Victorian period, but I merely refer to it in terms of endowing the woman with certain virtues, domestic or otherwise.

[9] VIII 424

[10] Turner, James Grantham. “ Love Made in the First Age.” *One Flesh*

(1994): 230+. Print

[11] IX 537-39

[12] Turner, James Grantham. " Love Made in the First Age." One Flesh

(1994): 230+. Print

[13] VIII 563-64

[14] VIII 564-66

[15] VIII 602-04

[16] When I refer to any ' materialist construction', it refers to how the image of the woman was itemized and her beauty deemed the exchange currency during the Restoration.

[17] IX 215-19

[18] IX 232-34

[19] IX 267-269

[20] IX 303-05

[21] IX 332-36

[22] IX 375

[23] IX 378

[24] It can also be read as Eve destabilizing her own position, but that's not really relevant to our current discussion.

[25] IX 385-86

[26] IX 425-457

[27] IX 447-48

[28] IX 654

[29] IX 820-21

[30] IX 999



[31] IX 1174

[32] IX 1147-48