

Milton's Sublimity

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Abstract:-

Milton- the second great poet of England stands next only to Shakespeare. The characteristic of Milton's poetry is sublimity. Sublimity is the only word that can truly characterize Milton's poetry. Sublimity is the capacity to enlarge the imagination of the reader. Milton was a noble soul with a high conception of his calling. His personal loftiness imparts loftiness to all that he writes. As he spent his whole life in the company of the loftiest minds, his poetry became the expression of loftiness of mind. His themes are far removed from the trivialities of life. He deals with the issues of eternal interest and his genius is justified by dealing with merely grand themes. Milton's imagination is all – comprehensive. Only a man of Milton's imaginative and creative faculty could have shaped and created the Paradise Lost. Puritanism may be regarded as the renaissance of the moral sense of man. It emerged as the great controlling moral and social force. Milton was a great metrical artist, one who has applied plenty of meters with greater skill. Milton, as we know, is pre – eminently the poet of noble thoughts having noble expression. His noble expression includes Milton as a metrical artist, his blank verse, his verbal melody, his diction and versification. Milton suggests much more than he actually states or describes. Suggestiveness is a prominent quality of Milton's style. The present study focuses on sublimity in Milton's poetry. It also highlights Milton's love of beauty, his stately and majestic themes, his high conception of the poet's calling. It also deals with his subjective note, religious fervor, classicism and his grand style.

Keywords:- Milton, sublimity, noble, elevation, exaltation, loftiness, grandeur.

Milton- the second great poet of England stands next only to Shakespeare. The characteristic of Milton's poetry is sublimity. Sublimity is the only word that can truly characterize Milton's poetry. Sublimity is the capacity to enlarge the imagination of the reader. Milton has surpassed both the ancient and the modern poets in this respect. As John Dennis puts it "Where he has excelled all other poets, is in what he has expressed, which is the surest and noblest mark the most transporting effect of sublimity."¹ Sublimity simply means an aesthetic delight or pleasure. Aesthetic pleasure is obviously pertaining to spiritual, moral as well as intellectual satisfaction. It is poetry which elevates and uplifts the reader. Whatever he has composed has been characterized by dignity and nobility which may be called his sublimity. His poetry creates an elevating influence on our mind. The readers are found under his moral exaltation. When noble thoughts are expressed by noble ways and that is the sublimity. Sublimity in poetry emerges when noble thoughts find a noble expression. Milton's subject matter is noble and the manner to express it is also equally noble. Milton lived in the company of the great writers of ancient Greece and Rome. He also lived in the company of great Christian teachers and saints and hence he could never come down to the cheap love poems which had been the fashion ever since the Renaissance. "Not lovers and lasses, but God, Satan, Adam, Eve and Christ are the characters that Milton introduces in his poetry. In Comus, the poet presents sublime thoughts concerning virtue and chastity. In Paradise Lost, he represents the struggle between Good and Evil and the ultimate victory of the Good. Paradise Regained is an expression of the sublime thoughts and ideas of Milton concerning God and religion."²

Milton was a noble soul with a high conception of his calling. His personal loftiness imparts loftiness to all that he writes. As he spent his whole life in the company of the loftiest minds, his poetry became the expression of loftiness of mind. He was poetically gifted and inspired noble soul which expresses merely sublime work. He was not only the sublime poet but also profound lover of beauty in the nature. He was deeply sensitive to the beauties of external nature and depicts the beauties of the countryside in L'Allegro. The word – picture and painting of nature that he has

described in this poem is extremely beautiful and amazing. In *Paradise Lost* his sense of beauty is amazingly supreme. In Book IV, he describes not only the beauty of nature, but also the physical charms of Adam and Eve. He may rightly be called the perfectionists among the poets as the perfection is dear to the poet and his poetry is equally perfect in expression. The sublimity in Milton's poetry enhances with the combination of beauty and his dignity of manner. Majesty is the quality that Milton imparted to English poetry. "English poetry between Shakespeare and Milton had many graces, but the quality of stateliness was imparted to it by Milton. The poet never stoops down at any stage nor does he agree to be on a lower plane, just to satisfy the tastes of the lower sections of the reading public. Milton is always stately, majestic and grand. The subject that he chooses for his composition are stately and the treatment that he gives to them is equally stately and dignified. Common objects, and low, petty themes, do not form the subject-matter of his poetry."³

His themes are far removed from the trivialities of life. He deals with the issues of eternal interest and his genius is justified by dealing with merely grand themes. Milton's themes are – disobedience and the fall of man, original sin, the redemption of humanity by Christ, and the justification of the ways of God to man, etc. So his themes are often stately, majestic and of eternal interests. Like Aristotle, Milton held a high conception of poet's calling. The poet is divinely inspired and capable of persuading people to a life of virtue and dedication. Milton gives his views on poetry. "He writes: "The abilities of the poet are the inspired gift of God rarely bestowed." On the other hand, he expresses his anxiety regarding the vulgar productions of the poets who write amorous verses for the sake of cheap popularity. Such poets are not true to the high and noble ideas of poetry."⁴ In Milton's concept poetry as an entertainment and a means of delight to the reader was given a low place. The aim of poetry is quite high and idealistic. Milton's great theme in *Paradise Lost* is purely religious and moral:

I may assert Eternal Providence
And justify the ways of God to men.

The poet dwells on the moral theme – crime, punishment, sin and suffering:

That brought with this world of woe
Sin and her shadow death, and misery.

The business of the poet is lofty and exalted and to maintain the dignity of this vocation, Milton writes poetry of great sublimity and beauty of the highest perfection. There are plenty of examples of his artistic sincerity in his poems. As we know his every word is carefully chosen and everything superfluous is rigidly excluded. He says what he has to say in the best and the fewest words possible. The high seriousness and the moral of Milton's poetry goes well with his high conception of the calling of a poet. He writes as a perfect artist and whatever he has written bears the hall – mark of his artistic perfection.

Milton's imagination is all – comprehensive. Only a man of Milton's imaginative and creative faculty could have shaped and created the *Paradise Lost*. The theme of Milton's epic is vast. It is of a more universal human interest than those of any of his predecessors, both ancient and modern. The imagination of the poet moves from heaven to hell, through the intervening chaos, and this could only have been possible with the superb imagination that the poet has possessed. Milton's poetry is pre – eminently autobiographical. In fact, it is the mirror to his own life. Milton himself is in every line of his poetry. His learned character is prominently reflected in the allusions and references of his works. His Puritanism, his faith in God and religion imparts loftiness and sublimity to his poetry. His *Lycidas*, *Comus*, *Paradise Lost* are all equally subjective and personal. Though *Paradise Lost* is an epic dealing with the fall of man and original sin, yet it is so influenced by the personality of Milton that in order to understand the epic, it is necessary to know something about the man himself. This is

so because Milton himself is in every line of Paradise Lost. "Milton's Satan is an expression of Milton's spirit of defiance of the new order which was established on the collapse of the puritan commonwealth after the death of Cromwell. Milton's religious zeal is seen in the very theme of the poem, i.e. to justify the ways of God to man, and his prejudice against womankind is reflected in his treatment of Eve and the tirade of Adam against marriage."⁵ Milton's all sonnets are autobiographical. We cannot separate the man from the poet. In order to understand his poetry, we must have some knowledge of the life and character of the poet.

Puritanism may be regarded as the renaissance of the moral sense of man. It emerged as the great controlling moral and social force. The Grecio – Roman renaissance did not touch the moral nature of man, it did nothing for the religious, social and political emancipation. The puritan movement was the greatest movement for moral and social reform. Puritans wanted to make the people honest, free and they insisted on the purity, i.e. divinity and morality of life. Puritans were extremist and fanatics in the matter of religion. They were against common pleasures like drama and considered singing and dancing as immoral. The general tendency of the puritan was anti – social. Milton's poetry is an influence of the Renaissance and the Reformation movement. His childhood witnessed the Renaissance and youth witnessed the emergence of Puritan ideals. So, Milton is a link between two ages. He is both a belated Elizabethan and a disciple of the Reformation. The Elizabethan love of beauty and classical learning is given an expression by Milton as the moral fervor of the Puritans. Like Shakespeare he was thoroughly imbued with classical learning and scholarship. Moreover, Milton is devoid of the wide humanity and the all - embracing sympathy which is found noticeable in Shakespeare. Sometimes Milton shared the Puritan contempt for the fine arts, like music and advocated the stern repression of the aesthetic impulse which Puritans severely advocated. Hence, Puritans claimed Milton to be their typical poet. His controversial and theological writing was not appreciated by the modern mind. "Curiously interwrought with the severity of his religious nature is a strong bent for the classics, which is pagan and sensuous."⁶ His classical bent is reflected in his choice of classical and semi – classical forms – the epic, the classical tragedy, the pastoral, and the sonnet. It is also reflected in the elaborate descriptions in Paradise Lost and his fondness for classical allusions by which his poetry is heavily burdened. His classical bent is also clear in the dignity of his style. In his choice of diction we have the classical element abundantly apparent.

Milton was a great metrical artist, one who has applied plenty of metres with greater skill. According to Milton rhyme is not necessary adjunct or true ornament of a poem. However, his early and minor poems are in rhyme and these are read with greater interest by the reader than his great work in blank verse. His early poems reveal his command over the use of rhyme; his later poetry including Paradise Lost brings out his skill in blank verse. Blank verse had been effectively used by the dramatists, like Marlowe and Shakespeare before him, but it had not been used by the poets with any success. Milton's originality is seen in his boldly handling blank verse for the purpose of writing poetry. At the time when Paradise Lost was composed, Heroic Couplet was in fashion and it was considered as the only appropriate metre for poetry. Milton, on the contrary, exhibited great originality and boldness in going against the current fashion of the Heroic couplet and using blank verse for his masterpiece. At the time when blank verse was on a verge to decay, Milton lifted it up and used it neither for conversation nor for rhetorical purpose. In order to impart variety and avoid monotony, variations are introduced and Milton's greatness as a metrical artist is obviously apparent in the skill of imparting variety to his blank verse. He gave a new character to English blank verse. Verbal melody is a prominent characteristic of his diction and versification. Words are carefully chosen with reference to their sounds. Milton is unique in the flawless perfection of his diction and versification. The grandeur of his versification – its richness, music, melody and rhythmical flow –

cannot fail to strike even an ordinary reader. "In music and variety his blank verse stands unrivalled. Tennyson rightly calls Milton, "the mighty – mouthed inventor of harmonies – God gifted organ – voice of England."⁷

Milton, as we know, is pre – eminently the poet of noble thoughts having noble expression. His noble expression includes Milton as a metrical artist, his blank verse, his verbal melody, his diction and versification. The grandeur of his versification – its richness, music, melody and rhythmic flow is so amazingly superb that it influences every reader. His noble thoughts by finding such a noble manner of expression become sublime. His subject matter and his way of expression is equally noble. Sublimity is a result of noble thoughts and noble expression. Sublimity emerges in poetry when poetically gifted noble thoughts find a noble expression. God and religion in the Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained is a noble thought which is expressed nobly by the poet, as a result, it has created sublimity in his poetry. Milton's poetry is majestic English poetry. English poetry between Shakespeare and Milton had many graces, but the quality of stateliness was imparted to English poetry by Milton. He is often stately, majestic and grand. The subjects chosen by Milton for composition are noble and the treatment he gave to them is equally noble and dignified. It is an eternal interest the poet often dealt with -- the problem of the fall of man and original sin, the redemption of humanity by Christ and the justification of the ways of God to man.

Milton suggests much more than he actually states or describes. Suggestiveness is a prominent quality of Milton's style. His poetry is to be read imaginatively. The work of Milton cannot be understood or enjoyed, unless the mind of the reader co – operate with that of the writer. Milton does not paint a finished picture, on the contrary, he sketches and leaves others to fill up the outline. Milton remains the great master of the grand style which emerges when a poetically gifted noble nature, treats with simplicity a noble subject. Eternal thoughts are uttered by him in an eternal way. For want of a better word his style has been called 'Miltonic,' a thing apart in English literature. Loftiness of thought and majesty of style of expression combine to make Milton's style 'sublime' in the real sense of the term. Milton's style has been called grand style as it has an unmistakable stamp of sublimity and majesty. His diction is grand and majestic and the language he employs is not the language which men generally use to express their feelings. Milton uses Latin words, Latin constructions and inversions. His words are carefully chosen with reference both to their sense and their sound. He says what he has to say in the fewest and the best possible words. Similes and metaphors abound in his work. There is also a liberal use of Homeric similes; the result is that the impression that is left on our mind after reading his poetry is that of grandeur, majesty and sublimity. "In the sure and flawless perfection of his rhythm and diction, he is as admirable as Virgil or Dante, and in this respect he is unique among us. None else in English literature possesses the like distinction."⁸

Conclusion:

To sum up, it may be concluded that since Milton lived in the company of the great writers of ancient Greece and Rome, great Christian teachers and saints, he could never come down to the cheap love poems which had been the fashion ever since Renaissance. Whatever Milton composed has been characterized by dignity and nobility which may rightly be called his sublimity. His poetry creates an elevating influence on the readers mind. Sublimity in poetry emerges when noble thoughts find a noble expression. Milton's subject matter is prominently noble and the manner in which he expressed it is also equally noble. His poetry elevates and uplifts the reader as it has a moral exaltation. He was poetically gifted and inspired noble soul which expresses sublime work. The poet is divinely inspired soul capable of persuading people to lead a life of virtue and dedication. Milton's sublimity involves

in his issues of eternal interest and in his mode of expression i. e. loftiness, stateliness, and grandeur of style which may be called sublimity.

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