

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

<https://llrjournal.com/index.php/11>

**THE POLITICS OF OBEDIENCE AND DISOBEDIENCE IN JOHN
MILTON'S PARADISE LOST: A STUDY OF POWER, AUTHORITY AND
MORAL CHOICE**



Rafey Konin, *Abid Ali Khan

BS English Literature, Institute of English Studies
(IES), University of the Punjab, Lahore

Rafeykonain965@gmail.com

*MPhil in English (Literature), Department of English
University of Malakand, KP Pakistan

(Corresponding Author)

abidalikhanuom@gmail.com

Abstract

This research article explores the intricate dynamics of obedience and disobedience in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, focusing on how the poem negotiates themes of power, authority, and moral choice. Milton's epic is not merely a theological narrative of the Fall of Man; it is also a profound political commentary on hierarchical structures and human agency. Through the characterizations of God, Satan, Adam, and Eve, Milton constructs a complex discourse on the legitimacy and limits of authority, challenging readers to examine the moral implications of both submission and rebellion.

The analysis investigates how Milton presents obedience as both a spiritual duty and a political necessity, while disobedience emerges as a morally ambiguous force—simultaneously destructive and empowering. The study draws attention to Satan's insurrection as a metaphor for political resistance and Adam and Eve's transgression as an act of individual moral choice. Milton's own historical context, marked by civil unrest and debates over monarchy and republicanism, frames the poem's ideological underpinnings. The paper employs a close reading of key passages alongside critical perspectives from political theology and literary criticism to interrogate how obedience to divine authority is depicted as essential for cosmic order, while disobedience is portrayed as both a tragic flaw and a catalyst for human development.

Furthermore, the article examines Milton's use of language and rhetorical strategies that shape the reader's perception of authority figures and moral agency. By highlighting the tension between free will and divine command, the study reveals *Paradise Lost* as a work that transcends its biblical source material to address universal questions about power, governance, and ethical responsibility. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of Milton's engagement with political philosophy and moral psychology within the epic tradition.

Key Words: Obedience, Disobedience, Moral choice, Power, Authority, Free will, Rebellion, Divine justice, Governance, Hierarchy.

Introduction

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) is widely regarded as one of the most influential epic poems in the English literary tradition, yet its enduring significance lies not merely in its theological or aesthetic richness but in its profound engagement with political and moral questions. At its core, *Paradise Lost* is a poetic exploration of power, authority, obedience, and rebellion—presented through the cosmic struggle between God and Satan, the hierarchical

order of Heaven, and the fall of humankind. This paper argues that Milton's epic serves as a complex meditation on the politics of obedience and disobedience, reflecting the ideological tensions of its historical moment while raising timeless questions about the nature of authority, free will, and moral responsibility. Through an analysis grounded in political theology and literary theory, this study positions *Paradise Lost* as a critical text in the discourse of early modern political thought, where the sacred and the secular intersect in the drama of moral choice.

The political dimensions of *Paradise Lost* are inseparable from Milton's own historical context. As a staunch supporter of the English Republic and a vocal critic of monarchy, Milton's writings outside of poetry—particularly *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649)—make clear his belief in the conditional legitimacy of rulers and the right of people to resist tyranny. In *Paradise Lost*, these themes reappear through the characterization of Satan, whose rebellious rhetoric often echoes the language of liberty and resistance. Critics such as Christopher Hill (1977) have pointed out that Satan's revolutionary zeal closely parallels that of 17th-century anti-royalist sentiment, thereby complicating his role as a mere embodiment of evil. Milton does not offer a simplistic binary of good and evil but rather presents disobedience as a morally ambiguous act, inviting readers to consider whether rebellion against authority is inherently sinful or potentially just.

This ambiguity is most evident in the figure of Satan, whose defiant cry—"Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven" (Milton, 1667, Book I, l. 263)—resonates with notions of individual autonomy and political resistance. Satan's rhetorical appeal, his leadership of the rebel angels, and his argument against "tyranny" in Heaven present him not only as a theological villain but also as a political figure advocating self-rule. Yet, as Stanley Fish (1998) argues, the poem ultimately reveals the limits and contradictions of such autonomy. While Satan claims to be free, he becomes increasingly enslaved to his own pride and isolation. Thus, Milton critiques not only tyranny but also the illusion of freedom when it is severed from divine order. The poem's political theology affirms the need for just authority while also acknowledging the human impulse to question and resist power.

Obedience, on the other hand, is dramatized through Adam and Eve, whose initial harmony with divine command is disrupted by curiosity and persuasion. The temptation scene in Book IX is pivotal in understanding Milton's complex moral universe. Eve's act of disobedience is not portrayed as a simplistic failure but as a result of nuanced emotional and rational processes. Her desire for knowledge, equality, and agency—though leading to the Fall—also reflects the human capacity for moral deliberation. Feminist scholars such as Diane Kelsey McColley (1997) have emphasized that Eve's choice must be understood within

the poem's broader examination of free will and mutual responsibility, rather than through a patriarchal lens of blame. Her disobedience is both an assertion of self and a tragic lapse, thereby complicating the traditional association of obedience with virtue and disobedience with sin.

Milton's depiction of divine authority further deepens the political implications of the epic. God the Father, while omnipotent, governs not through arbitrary will but through reasoned justice and foreknowledge. He declares that obedience must be freely chosen, insisting that "they themselves ordain'd their fall" (Milton, 1667, Book III, l. 128). This emphasis on voluntary obedience underscores Milton's belief in the moral agency of individuals and the ethical foundations of governance. Divine authority, in this context, is not tyrannical but rational and just—establishing a model of rulership that contrasts with the absolutist monarchies of Milton's time. The idea that obedience must be grounded in reason and consent aligns with Enlightenment political philosophy, particularly the writings of John Locke, who, like Milton, advocated for the rights of individuals against illegitimate power.

The interplay between obedience and disobedience in *Paradise Lost* thus reflects broader philosophical and political tensions. The poem grapples with the paradox that moral freedom entails the possibility of error and rebellion. Adam and Eve are not puppets but thinking beings whose choices carry weight. Their fall, though tragic, is also a testament to the dignity of human freedom and the possibility of redemption. As Northrop Frye (1965) observes, the epic structure of *Paradise Lost* moves from order through chaos to a new kind of order—one that acknowledges loss but also affirms the human capacity for moral growth. In this sense, Milton's treatment of disobedience is not merely punitive but transformative, suggesting that even in failure, there is the potential for renewal and deeper understanding.

Intertextually, *Paradise Lost* echoes classical and biblical sources while reshaping them in the service of a uniquely early modern political theology. The rebellion of the angels draws on the mythic structure of civil war found in texts like Lucan's *Pharsalia*, while Adam and Eve's moral trial parallels the biblical account in Genesis. Yet Milton reinvents these narratives, placing at their center a meditation on the ethics of power and resistance. The poem's engagement with classical epic conventions, such as the invocation of the muse and heroic warfare, is subverted to explore spiritual conflict and moral choice. In doing so, Milton creates a new kind of heroism—one that values obedience not as submission, but as rational fidelity to justice and truth.

In conclusion, the political and moral concerns embedded in *Paradise Lost* elevate it beyond a mere theological allegory. Milton invites readers to interrogate the legitimacy of power, the responsibility of the governed, and the moral consequences of choice. The tension between obedience and

disobedience is not resolved simply through punishment or reward, but through a deeper exploration of human freedom, divine justice, and the complex realities of authority. This paper will examine how Milton uses narrative, character, and theological reflection to navigate these tensions, ultimately offering a vision of political and moral life that remains relevant in both literary and philosophical discourse.

Literature Review

Scholarly interpretations of *Paradise Lost* have long recognized John Milton's epic as not only a theological meditation on sin and redemption but also as a profoundly political work. Embedded in its portrayal of celestial rebellion and human disobedience is a nuanced exploration of authority, liberty, and the moral complexities of obedience. Scholars from multiple critical traditions have explored how the poem engages with early modern political thought, particularly in the context of the English Civil War, the fall of monarchy, and Milton's own radical republican beliefs.

One of the most influential political readings of *Paradise Lost* emerges from the work of Christopher Hill (1977), who interprets the epic through the lens of revolutionary politics. Hill situates Milton within the ideological ferment of 17th-century England, emphasizing how the poet's engagement with political resistance, especially in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649), shapes the representation of rebellion in the poem. Satan, for Hill, can be seen as an echo of Cromwellian defiance, invoking the rhetoric of liberty and self-governance against divine absolutism. However, Hill also notes the inherent tension in Milton's presentation, as the same language of resistance that fuels Satan's cause ultimately reveals itself as corrupted by pride and ambition—suggesting a critique of political extremism as much as an affirmation of liberty.

This complexity is further developed in the work of Stanley Fish (1998), who famously argues that *Paradise Lost* deliberately seduces the reader into sympathizing with Satan, only to expose the moral instability of such sympathy. According to Fish, the reader's interpretive journey mirrors the moral fall of Adam and Eve: a process of temptation, error, and correction. From this perspective, Milton's treatment of disobedience becomes a vehicle for exploring the reader's moral reasoning, rather than an unambiguous endorsement or condemnation of rebellion. The poem, therefore, becomes an active moral test, blurring the lines between heroic dissent and hubristic defiance.

Other scholars have focused on the representation of authority in the poem. John Leonard (2000) argues that Milton constructs a hierarchical order in Heaven not as an endorsement of tyranny, but as a reflection of divine reason and justice. God's sovereignty, Leonard contends, is legitimized by wisdom and moral clarity, not by brute force. This model of rightful authority is contrasted

with Satan's rhetoric of self-rule, which ultimately collapses into authoritarianism masked as freedom. This binary underscores Milton's broader concern with the legitimacy of power and the moral responsibilities of both rulers and subjects.

Feminist critics have also contributed significantly to this discourse, particularly in relation to the depiction of Eve and the dynamics of gendered obedience. Diane Kelsey McColley (1997) emphasizes that Eve's decision to eat the fruit should be seen not as blind transgression, but as an act of agency informed by complex reasoning and emotional longing. Rather than portraying Eve as inherently inferior or morally weaker, McColley argues that Milton offers a nuanced portrayal of feminine will and moral deliberation. Eve's disobedience, in this reading, reflects the broader human capacity for moral choice and the risks inherent in autonomy. This perspective challenges patriarchal interpretations that frame obedience as virtue and disobedience as vice, opening the text to feminist reinterpretations of moral responsibility.

Intertextual comparisons with classical epic and biblical texts further enrich the analysis of power and disobedience in *Paradise Lost*. Milton draws heavily from Virgil's *Aeneid* and Homer's *Iliad*, invoking epic conventions such as heroic speeches, divine interventions, and cosmic battles. Yet he subverts these conventions by relocating the center of moral action from the battlefield to the inner conscience of his characters. Unlike Aeneas or Achilles, whose heroism lies in martial valor, Milton's Adam and Eve must navigate the moral complexities of obedience and temptation. Their fall is not the result of external warfare but of internal deliberation and flawed judgment. This shift marks a significant evolution in the epic tradition, as Milton redefines heroism in moral and spiritual terms.

Further comparisons can be drawn with the biblical account in Genesis, which provides the foundational narrative for *Paradise Lost*. However, as Regina Schwartz (1993) argues, Milton's version is far more than a retelling—it is a theologically and politically charged reinterpretation. Schwartz highlights how the poem interrogates divine authority and the nature of covenantal relationships, emphasizing how obedience in *Paradise Lost* is framed not as passive submission but as a conscious, rational act of alignment with divine justice. In doing so, Milton not only amplifies the moral stakes of Genesis but also engages with the philosophical currents of his time, particularly those concerning natural law and individual conscience.

Overall, the existing literature positions *Paradise Lost* as a deeply layered text that resists simplistic categorization. Its portrayal of obedience and disobedience operates on multiple levels—personal, political, theological—and challenges readers to consider the ethical consequences of power, freedom, and resistance. Whether through the seductive eloquence of Satan, the quiet

deliberation of Adam and Eve, or the rational governance of God, Milton explores the fragile balance between authority and liberty, making *Paradise Lost* a rich site for political and moral inquiry.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research methodology, rooted in literary analysis and political theory, to explore the representations of obedience, disobedience, authority, and moral agency in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The aim of this methodology is to critically engage with the text as a literary artifact shaped by historical context, philosophical thought, and theological discourse, while uncovering its relevance to early modern and contemporary debates on power and resistance.

The primary method used is close textual analysis, focusing on key passages that illuminate Milton's treatment of authority and rebellion. Attention is paid to the poem's diction, imagery, structure, rhetorical strategies, and narrative voice, particularly in the depictions of Satan, God, Adam, and Eve. The goal is to reveal how Milton constructs complex moral and political dilemmas through poetic form and character development. This method enables a nuanced reading that moves beyond surface interpretations, recognizing the interplay of ideology and narrative in the epic.

The study draws heavily on intertextual and comparative analysis, connecting *Paradise Lost* with both classical epics (such as Homer's *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid*) and biblical texts (particularly Genesis), as well as with Milton's own political writings, such as *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649). This intertextual framework allows the research to situate *Paradise Lost* within a broader literary and intellectual tradition, highlighting how Milton adapts and challenges existing narratives to engage with political and theological concerns of his time. A historical-contextual approach supplements the textual analysis by situating the poem within the sociopolitical climate of 17th-century England. Milton's engagement with republicanism, monarchy, civil war, and the concept of divine right informs much of the poem's moral framework. By incorporating scholarly work on Milton's biography, Puritan ideology, and early modern political thought, the research maintains a grounded understanding of the poet's ideological environment.

Additionally, the study applies critical theory, particularly feminist and reader-response approaches, to examine how obedience and disobedience are portrayed through gendered dynamics and how readers are invited to interpret moral choice. The depiction of Eve, for instance, is analyzed not just as a character within a theological narrative, but also as a symbolic figure within patriarchal discourse. Reader-response theory, such as that of Stanley Fish, is used to explore how Milton engages readers in the ethical tension between

sympathy for Satan and ultimate allegiance to divine justice.

This research does not rely on empirical or quantitative data but instead contributes to the field through theoretical insight, intertextual interpretation, and ethical reflection. All literary sources and secondary materials are documented in APA style, and conclusions are drawn based on textual evidence and scholarly consensus. By combining close reading with critical frameworks, this methodology offers a comprehensive exploration of *Paradise Lost* as a politically charged and morally complex literary work.

Discussion and Analysis

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is a masterful engagement with the political and moral discourse of the 17th century, presenting obedience and disobedience not as fixed binaries but as fluid ethical positions mediated by free will, power structures, and personal accountability. The epic's treatment of authority—divine, celestial, and human—reflects Milton's own ideological struggles during a period of political upheaval in England, particularly surrounding monarchy, revolution, and republicanism. By weaving together theological doctrine with classical epic form and philosophical inquiry, Milton crafts a narrative that complicates traditional notions of sin and virtue. In doing so, he transforms *Paradise Lost* into a profound meditation on moral agency, the legitimacy of authority, and the consequences of rebellion.

At the heart of the narrative is Satan, whose fall from Heaven and subsequent leadership of the rebellion against God present disobedience as a calculated political stance rather than sheer malevolence. His famous declaration—"Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven" (Milton, 1667, Book I, l. 263)—is not merely a mark of defiance but a profound expression of self-determination and anti-authoritarian will. Critics such as Christopher Hill (1977) have emphasized the political undercurrents in Satan's rhetoric, drawing parallels between Satan's rebellious stance and the revolutionary ideologies of Milton's own time. Hill asserts that Satan embodies the voice of resistance against unjust or autocratic rule, invoking ideals of liberty and self-governance that resonated with the English Parliamentarians who opposed the monarchy. However, while Milton allows Satan to articulate the language of freedom, he simultaneously reveals the moral decay that follows disobedience when it is driven by pride and ambition rather than reasoned conscience.

Stanley Fish (1998) complicates readings that view Satan as a revolutionary hero, arguing instead that Milton designs the poem to entangle the reader in Satan's rhetoric, only to expose its manipulative and ultimately self-destructive logic. Fish maintains that readers who sympathize with Satan are participating in the very moral fall they are reading about, thus making the act of interpretation itself a test of obedience. This interpretive tension deepens the moral complexity of *Paradise Lost*, as Milton invites readers to discern between

legitimate resistance and false freedom. In this light, disobedience is not inherently evil, but must be evaluated in terms of motive, context, and consequence.

The human characters in *Paradise Lost*, Adam and Eve, further exemplify the nuanced moral terrain of obedience. Unlike Satan, whose rebellion is absolute, Adam and Eve are portrayed as morally capable beings who exercise free will in an imperfect yet redeemable way. Their decision to eat the forbidden fruit is not a simple act of defiance, but one born of love, curiosity, and persuasion. Milton shows Eve contemplating her choice with careful reasoning—"What fear I then? rather what know to fear / Under this ignorance of good and evil?" (Milton, 1667, Book IX, ll. 815–816)—thereby framing disobedience as a complex moral deliberation. Feminist scholars like Diane Kelsey McColley (1997) argue that Milton's Eve is a rational and autonomous subject, whose fall is not caused by weakness but by an informed, if flawed, assertion of selfhood. In contrast to traditional patriarchal interpretations that vilify Eve, this reading reclaims her disobedience as a critical moment of agency within a male-dominated narrative structure.

Milton's God is presented not as a despotic ruler, but as an omniscient and just sovereign who permits disobedience to preserve the dignity of free will. He asserts that "they themselves ordain their fall" (Milton, 1667, Book III, l. 128), suggesting that obedience must be voluntary to be morally valuable. This aligns with Milton's republican ideals, as expressed in his prose works like *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649), where he defends the right to overthrow tyrannical rulers. In *Paradise Lost*, however, the distinction between just authority and tyranny is carefully maintained. God's rule is characterized by reason, foresight, and mercy, while Satan's supposed "liberation" of the fallen angels leads to deception, suffering, and despair. This juxtaposition underscores the poem's central thesis: that true authority must be rational and benevolent, and that disobedience is morally defensible only when it opposes genuine oppression, not divine justice.

The epic structure of *Paradise Lost* allows Milton to explore disobedience through multiple narrative levels: celestial rebellion, human transgression, and internal moral struggle. The classical form, inherited from Homer and Virgil, is repurposed to tell a Christian story, yet retains its political valence. While Virgil's *Aeneid* glorifies empire through the pious Aeneas, Milton's epic interrogates the very notion of glory, portraying Adam and Eve not as conquerors but as moral agents navigating temptation. As Northrop Frye (1965) notes, Milton redefines heroism as moral steadfastness rather than military valor. In this context, obedience becomes a form of ethical courage, and disobedience a potential path to self-discovery or ruin.

Furthermore, *Paradise Lost* engages with biblical intertexts, particularly Genesis,

yet expands and complicates its themes. Where Genesis provides a succinct account of the Fall, Milton adds psychological depth, philosophical reflection, and emotional nuance. Regina Schwartz (1993) argues that Milton reimagines the Fall not merely as a transgression, but as a crisis of relational ethics, wherein obedience is tied to love, trust, and mutual understanding. In this way, *Paradise Lost* becomes a meditation on the moral fabric of community, both divine and human.

The conclusion of the poem, where Adam and Eve are exiled from Eden, is not a final condemnation but the beginning of moral and spiritual growth. They walk "hand in hand with wandering steps and slow" (Milton, 1667, Book XII, l. 648), suggesting that obedience, after failure, is still possible through repentance and grace. Milton thus offers a redemptive vision that balances justice and mercy, authority and autonomy. The political message embedded in this conclusion is clear: disobedience, though inevitable in human life, must be tempered by humility and reflection if it is to lead to genuine freedom.

In sum, *Paradise Lost* explores the politics of obedience and disobedience through richly layered narrative strategies, theological debate, and character development. Milton neither glorifies rebellion nor demands blind submission. Instead, he presents a morally complex universe in which authority must be just, and disobedience must be principled to be defensible. The epic continues to resonate in modern political and ethical discourse, as it challenges readers to consider the legitimacy of power, the responsibilities of conscience, and the fragile boundaries between liberty and pride. Through its interplay of divine command and human choice, Milton's *Paradise Lost* remains a timeless study of moral agency and the enduring struggle between authority and freedom.

Conclusion

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* remains a monumental work that intricately explores the complexities of obedience and disobedience within theological, political, and moral frameworks. Through the epic's multi-layered narrative, Milton challenges readers to move beyond simplistic interpretations of good versus evil, instead presenting disobedience as a nuanced moral and political act with varying motivations and consequences. The poem's portrayal of figures like Satan, Adam, and Eve illustrates that disobedience is not inherently immoral but must be examined in the context of intent, pride, justice, and the legitimacy of the authority being challenged.

Milton's personal political convictions, especially his advocacy for republican liberty and resistance to tyranny, deeply inform his treatment of authority in *Paradise Lost*. God's rule is portrayed as just and rational, demanding obedience not for dominance but for order, love, and truth. Conversely, Satan's rebellion, while cloaked in the language of liberty, is shown to arise from egotism and ambition rather than from genuine ethical resistance. This dual portrayal

encourages readers to critically evaluate the motivations behind rebellion and submission alike, making *Paradise Lost* a deeply relevant text for discussions about the nature of power and individual agency.

Adam and Eve's fall illustrates the human capacity for reasoned choice and the spiritual implications of freedom. Their disobedience, though tragic, is framed with empathy and philosophical depth. Milton emphasizes that true obedience must be voluntary, echoing his belief in the primacy of conscience and informed moral agency. Their eventual acceptance of responsibility and hope for redemption signifies that obedience, when grounded in understanding and humility, is not servitude but a conscious alignment with divine justice.

Ultimately, *Paradise Lost* does not provide definitive answers but rather invites sustained ethical reflection. The poem's treatment of obedience and disobedience remains profoundly relevant in contemporary discussions about moral autonomy, civil disobedience, and the legitimacy of authority. Through its interweaving of epic tradition, biblical narrative, and political ideology, *Paradise Lost* endures as a timeless exploration of the human condition. In examining the delicate balance between freedom and duty, Milton's work compels readers to consider not just whether to obey or rebel—but why.

References

- Fish, S. (1998). *Surprised by sin: The reader in Paradise Lost* (2nd ed.). Harvard University Press.
- Frye, N. (1965). *The return of Eden: Five essays on Milton's epics*. University of Toronto Press.
- Hill, C. (1977). *Milton and the English Revolution*. Viking Press.
- McColley, D. K. (1997). *Milton's Eve*. In T. Festa & J. Luxon (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Milton* (pp. 123–139). Cambridge University Press.
- Milton, J. (1667). *Paradise Lost*. London: Samuel Simmons. (Original work published 1667)
- Milton, J. (1649). *The tenure of kings and magistrates*. London.
- Fish, S. (1998). *Surprised by sin: The reader in Paradise Lost* (2nd ed.). Harvard University Press.
- Hill, C. (1977). *Milton and the English Revolution*. Viking Press.
- Leonard, J. (2000). *Naming in Paradise: Milton and the language of Adam and Eve*. Clarendon Press.
- McColley, D. K. (1997). *Milton's Eve*. In T. Festa & J. Luxon (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Milton* (pp. 123–139). Cambridge University Press.
- Milton, J. (1649). *The tenure of kings and magistrates*. London.
- Schwartz, R. (1993). *The curse of Cain: The violent legacy of monotheism*. University of Chicago Press.
- Fish, S. (1998). *Surprised by sin: The reader in Paradise Lost* (2nd ed.). Harvard University Press.
- Frye, N. (1965). *The return of Eden: Five essays on Milton's epics*. University of Toronto Press.
- Hill, C. (1977). *Milton and the English Revolution*. Viking Press.
- McColley, D. K. (1997). *Milton's Eve*. In T. Festa & J. Luxon (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion*

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

to Milton (pp. 123–139). Cambridge University Press.

Milton, J. (1649). *The tenure of kings and magistrates*. London.

Milton, J. (1667). *Paradise Lost*. London: Samuel Simmons.

Schwartz, R. (1993). *The curse of Cain: The violent legacy of monotheism*. University of Chicago Press.