

Penitence and Restoration of Samson Through the Lens of John Milton's *Samson Agonistes*

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Abstract

'Samson Agonistes', a Miltonic drama is the record of violation of religious obligations carried out by the devout leader Samson Agonistes. The violation of God's commandments and its brutal consequences leads towards the glorification of spiritual intimidation which causes the death of the protagonist Samson. Milton portrays Samson's destructive abuses on the verge of his bereavement. This struggle of Samson is rightly described as 'deathlike distinctiveness'. It is the internal dilemma of Samson to deal with the situation and he wishes to decode his awareness about the blunder which he had committed. The major objective of this research paper is to emphasize the manifestation of spiritual capacity of Samson and his violation of religious obligations through John Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. The researcher has attempted to portray the penitence and restoration of wrecked hero, Samson who was endowed with enormous vigour and a competent warrior. We can visualize that God; the almighty raised Samson, an inferior Jewish associate and made him a redeemer of Israelites. Finally this broken and repentance spirited fighter meet to the tragic death which resulted into the liberty of Israelites.

Keywords: *Social isolation, predicament, dehumanization, penitence, restoration, treachery, struggle.*

Introduction

John Milton (1608-1674) was a Christian Humanist Puritan poet, an eminent English author, pamphleteer and modern writer. He was one of the outstanding British writers of the 17th century. He graduated at University of Cambridge. He died on 8th November 1674 and laid to rest at St. Guiles, London. His famous poetic and dramatic works are:

1. *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity* (1629)
2. *'L'Allegro' and 'L'Penseroso* (1632)
3. *Lycidas* (1637)
4. *Paradise Lost* (1667)
5. *Paradise Regained* (1671)
6. *Samson Agonistes* (1671)

His prominent prose works are:

1. *Of Reformation* (1641)
2. *Of Education* (1644)
3. *Of True Religion* (1673)

4. *Prolusiones* (1674)

Aims and Objectives

The aims and objectives of the research are as under.

- a. To discuss the penitence and restoration of the protagonist Samson
- b. To manifest Samson's religious journey and his violation of religious obligations
- c. To portray Miltonic interpretation of 'Samson Agonistes'
- d. To explore the thematic concerns of 'Samson Agonistes'

Research Methodology

The present research is purely theoretical. Hence the researcher has gathered the material and employed theoretical, analytical, referential, descriptive and qualitative approaches in order to prove the validity of the facts discussed in the present research.

Literature Review

Literature review is the critical aspect which analyses the earlier researcher's perspectives on the said topic. The researcher has taken the references of the several researchers who have attempted to focus on Miltonic projections of Christianity. In this research he has shown thought provoking glimpses about the protagonist Samson through spiritual parameters. These articles as literature review will be offer the new insight to the readers to comprehend the theoretical background of the study.

Samson: A Blessed 'Nazirite' To God

Samson Agonistes is John Milton's well known closet tragedy and a long dramatic poem. It is written in 1671 in blank verse and based on the Greek model. It can be categorized by several names such as 'Samson: The Athlete', 'Samson: The Firebrand', 'Samson: The Violent', 'Samson: The Wrestler'. It is published in his epic 'Paradise Regained' in 1671. It illustrates the biblical themes. *Samson Agonistes* represents struggle of Samson. The present study consists of last stage of Samson's life which is described in Judges Ch. 13-16. Milton wrote this tragedy when he became blind. He describes Samson as the mighty celebrated Israelite combatant, adjudicator, divinely stimulated leader and an eyeless prisoner at Gaza of Philistines. Samson is distinguished for his unique power that he derives from his uncut hair.

In this context, Samson is a man of devotion and superhuman strength. Before Samson's conception, the angel of lord appears before Manoah's wife and said:

'Do not swallow wine and do not consume impure things. Look, you will conceive a son and no razor will work on his head. He will remain a blessed Nazirite to God from the womb. He is in particular faithful to the service of God. He is the chosen vessel of God to redeem Israel from the hands of their enemies.'¹ (Judges 13:4-14)

As per God's promise, Manoah's wife conceived a son. They christened him as Samson. The lord blessed the child and he grew in the glory of God. (Judges 13:24-25) Samson was a blessed person from his childhood. God has blessed him abundantly with physical strength.

One day Samson set off to the city of Timnah. There he witnessed a gorgeous lady of the Philistines. He requested his parents to get marry with the woman of Philistine. They told him not to marry with the Philistine woman because Philistines are their mortal enemies as they had dominance over Israel and secondly, they were uncircumcised. If he would get marry with her, God's wrath will come upon them. In Judges 14:3, Samson requested his father to marry with the woman of Timnah as she pleased him well. Samson's parents asked her hand for their son Samson. Later, as a part of wedding, they arranged a feast of seven days. Samson asked an answer for a riddle to the thirty companions, 'Out of the epicurean approached to gobble and out of the brawny appeared sugary.'² (Judges 14:14)

They could not explain the Samson's riddle as it was very difficult to solve and was beyond their understanding. On the seventh day, they came to Delilah and threatened her, 'Persuade your companion that he may give details of the brainteaser to us otherwise we will blaze you and your family with conflagration'.³ (Judges 14: 15)

Woman is very sensitive and too much caring. She never thinks ill of her own family, especially her parents and other members in the family. She never allows others to hurt her family members. Here out of familial concern, she reveals the anxiety before her husband.

'You do not feel affection for me. You have raised a puzzle to the Israelites but you haven't provide its answer to me.'⁴(Judges 14:16)

And Samson said to her, 'Look, I have not shared it to my parents, so could you expect the same from me?'⁵(Judges 14:16)

Here, Delilah noticed that her husband Samson did not disclosed the real answer of the riddle, she got irritated and went on weeping for next seven days after the end of the feast. She kept on asking him continuously about the correct answer. Finally, out of ceaseless urging and request of Delilah, Samson explained the riddle to her. Immediately, she approached the Philistines and revealed the answer of the riddle to them. Philistines approached to Samson on

the last day and gave the answer of his puzzle. They said that honey is sweet and lion is stronger. (Judges 14:18) Thus Philistines exploited Samson's wife Delilah. Samson became sad for exploiting his wife by Philistines. As per the assurance, Samson bestowed thirty linen clothes to the Philistines.

Samson took a young goat and expressed his desire to meet his wife. But his father in law banned him to visit Delilah. Here Samson went with irritation and he set the flames to the grain and vine yards. He destroyed everything. In return, Philistines also burned her and her family. Three thousand men of Judah vaulted him with two fresh wires and fetch him to Gaza. Then Philistines came and shouted against him. But their bondage is easily broken by the spirit of God. He found an unsullied chin of a donkey and assassinated a thousand men with it. Then he became very dehydrated. He requested God to satiate his thirst. Finally God quenched his thirst. Thus he got energy and thanked God.

Violation of Religious Obligations through Samson

Here, the readers can observe the spiritual destruction of Samson. It is the fact that when we follow the word of god and live God fearing life, we have the ultimate protection of God. The Lord almighty keeps us in his fence of blessings. But when we violate God and his commandments, we invite trials and tribulations in our life. The temptations bring a great disaster and calamity in our life. Here the readers observe the same experience in Samson's life. He loses his strength due to his violation of the Nazirite swear. Samson departs to the city of Gaza and observed a slut there. He fell in love with her and stayed with her at night. Samson persecuted through his opponents through the love of Delilah. The Philistines commanded her to tempt him and know the secret of his strength and what should be done to overpower him. They assured her if she succeeds in this mission, they will offer her 1100 pieces of silver. (Judges 16:5)

This was the great temptation for Delilah like Judah Iscariot, the disciple of Jesus, who betrayed and took thirty silver pieces from the chief priests and helped them in arresting Jesus Christ. (Mark 14:10). In Judges 16:6, the readers can visualize the fact that Delilah came under the influence of Philistines and she claimed Samson to unveil the clandestine of his power. Then Samson replied that if they fasten him with seven unsullied bow strings, then he shall become feeble and he will be like any other man. The Philistines waited in her room. Later, she bound him with them and said that the Philistines would like to attack upon him. (Judges 16:9-10) But Samson ruined the bowstrings as a thread of yarn breaks when it touches combustion. Thus the

surreptitious of his vigor was unrevealed. Now Delilah became distressed and asked the same question to him. Samson asserted that if they connect him firmly with fresh wires that have never been used, then he shall become scrawny and be like an ordinary man. (Judges 16:11) As per his orders, she springs back him with them. She enlightened him that the Philistines wish to assault him. (Judges 16:12) But Samson ruined them off his arms like a yarn. He intentionally conceals the furtive of his potency. Here Delilah in a troubled pitch exposes her annoyance for Samson. Now Samson tells her, ‘If you intertwine the seven locks of my head into the network of the loom, then I shall become frail and be like a common man.’ 6 (Judges 16:13).’

As per his directives, she wove it tightly with the plank of the loom and asked him about the Philistines molest on him. (Judges 16:14) But Samson destroyed their plan. Finally he told the genuineness to Delilah, ‘If I am shaven, then my supremacy will leave suddenly and I shall become meager and will be like an ordinary man.’7 (Judges 16:17)

Then Delilah summoned the Philistines. She asked the barber to cut his seven tresses. She harassed him and got confirmation about his loss of strength. Then she said that Philistines are there to attack on him. Samson with great strength tried to wake up from his sleep and attempted to set him free. But he failed in achieving his strength. He failed in doing so as the Lord has departed him due to his spirit of violation and religious obligations. (Judges 16:20)

The Philistines captivated him and put in a cell at Gaza. They brought him at the temple of Dagon. They mocked at Samson and thanked Dagon for giving Samson in their hands. (Judges 16:23-24) Samson disobeyed God and God left his hand. He gave Samson in the hands of Philistines. Ultimately he became the object of ridicule and humiliation. Philistines rejoiced and said, ‘Call for Samson from the prison to entertain us.’8 (Judges 16: 25)

Samson was called from the prison and he entertained all the Philistines by performing various performances. They stationed him between the pillars.

In the end, the readers visualize the true repentance of Samson. He realized his mistake. He requested God, the Lord Almighty, to provide him the strength last time. In despair, he wishes to take the revenge of Philistines. He believes in the justification of God. The Lord sees his faithful life and grants his request. Samson wished to take revenge of Philistines so he prayed to God to memorize and reinforce him. (Judges 16: 28) God granted his wish and bestowed him vigour to demolish his enemies. At Dagon temple, he shattered his captors and himself. He took the support of two columns and prayed God to fish the existence of nearly 3000 Philistines. (Judges 16:30)

Miltonic Interpretation of *Samson Agonistes*

Milton represents the drama 'Samson Agonistes' with certain logical interpretations with respect to story and characterization.

a. John Milton's 'Samson Agonistes' begins with Samson in the prison at Gaza. Here Samson is grieved by the betrayal of his wife. She convinced Samson to cut his hairs. The moment he trimmed his hairs, the power of God deserted him. All the trials and tribulations came in his life. Philistines blinded Samson and tortured him and made him an object of humiliation. The chorus pays a call on him in reformatory and remarks on his ordinary condition and his sightlessness.

b. His father Manoah visits Samson in prison and declares the celebration of Philistines after his defeat. This creates depression in Samson. Manoah shows his helplessness in the release of Samson.

c. We observe Samson's blindness in love for Delilah. The treachery of Delilah caused the physical blindness to Samson by the hands of Philistines. He becomes the root cause of his own doom. Delilah visits him in the prison and begs his forgiveness.

d. Harapha, the giant visits Samson and mocks him. At this juncture, Samson is helpless to seek help from God to fight against the giant. Finally Samson seeks help from God and succeeds in rebuking Harapha.

e. The last act of the drama is in the form of off stage. Samson destroys the Philistines by pulling the temple down on them and he also died in it.

The characters in *Samson Agonistes* are: Samson, Manoah, Samson, Delilah, Harapha, Public Officer, Messenger and Chorus. Here the protagonist Samson is arrested by the Philistines. He is brought in at temple of Dagon. Manoah requests the Philistine officer to deliver Samson. With a spirit of repentance, he humbles before God. He requests God to offer him the strength to destroy the Philistines. (SA: Lines 58-59) Samson, being a captive, admits that he has lost his power due to the strong desire for Delilah. He could not understand her deceptive nature. In this sense, he has betrayed the almighty. He revealed the truth before her in lines 407-413:

'I capitulated and revealed the secret to her,
This made me a slave of her,
This proves a servile punishment for me.'⁹

Harapha demonstrates in lines 1164-1167 that Samson is not a noble warrior. A barber's razor has subdued and weakened him.

'No commendable equivalent

For bravery to overwhelm, nor by the weapon
Of virtuous combatant...
But by the barbor's shaver best.' 10

The Chorus argues in lines 1277-1286 how God allows persons with the supremacy to liberate his populace from their acquaintances, especially through aggressive resources:

'He all their grenades
And accomplishments of warfare overwhelm
Mislaid their defence, preoccupied and astonished.'11

In the final lines 1755-1758, Milton comments:

'This is the true experience of great event
Here peace, passion and consolation have dismissed'.12

Thematic Significance of Milton's *Samson Agonistes*

Samson Agonistes is the amalgamation of Greek catastrophe and Hebrew narration. Greek tragedy allows Milton to describe the multifaceted concerns through chorus and messengers while Hebrew scripture permits him to focus the deliberations through biblical insight. Thus this permutation makes the transformation of Samson from a barbarian to religious fighter of God. The drama highlights the themes such as hostility, betrayal, men's desire for women, beliefs and sightlessness.

The subject matter of viciousness consists with retribution and demolition of God's adversaries. This violence is not materialistic but it is holy one. It is in fact the matter of devout horror. Here the protagonist Samson abandons the Philistine phantasm of incorporated and melodious humankind. Philistines arrange a sacred banquet and people eyewitness the atrocious annihilation of Samson in the form of violence. Milton describes violence through the words 'malevolence rumor, disgusting manifestation, place of revulsion and heartbreaking event'.

The play focuses betrayal of Samson by Delilah. It creates a mental picture of deceitful love. Men's longing for female is measured as adulation against divinity. Here Samson, the holy person of God, trapped and weakened because of his sexual desire for Delilah. Ultimately he lost his strength. Later, chorus attempts to seduce Samson and criticizes women as deceptive entity. In realistic sense, a wife always helps and thinks wellbeing of her husband. She never betrays him. Being an enfeebling vigor, she becomes the reason of Samson's disaster.

Religion is the major concern of *Samson Agonistes*. When Samson reveals the truth to Delilah, he loses his strength and favour of God. He undergone through several sufferings, trials and frustration situations. Thus he lost his the right to serve to God. The theme of blindness reveals the helplessness of Samson and his feeling of estrangement. This blind Samson now becomes

the object of fun and ridicule to the entire populace of philistines. He is the person without eyes at Gaza. This blindness we witness as internal and external one. He is unable to see his inner vision with manifestation of God. Externally he is eyeless and imprisoned due to betrayal of Delilah.

Samson Agonistes portrays the inner psyche and corporeal potency of Samson. Miltonic dramatic version starts with the downfall of Samson after his revealing secret to Delilah. He believed Delilah rather living God. It created a great havoc, depression and blindness in Samson's life. Thus he became the captive and prisoner of Philistines. He became irritated and was beleaguered by distress and became the powerless entity for his enemies. He was supposed to be the redeemer of Israelites. Samson was emotionally and psychologically engulfed with self pity and yearns for committing suicide. He repented for his little wisdom and questioned himself for his own irrational behaviour. Then Delilah visits Samson in jail and suggests staying with him at his service. Samson condemns her for her spirit of disloyalty. In *Samson Agonistes*, Samson is gradually stimulated from the state of depression. He understands that self-importance in his immoderate potency, sense of invincibility and temptation were the main issues of his disgrace. He was charmed by the beauty of Delilah. At the end of the drama, Samson regains his spiritual standards through the qualities of compensation and restoration. He shows his readiness to become the champion of God. Ultimately he kills innumerable philistines at the temple of Dagon with the help of God by seeking the strength.

Here, Milton describes Samson as a heroic figure in his state of renewal despite his physical accomplishment. He committed a sin against God and thus violated commandments of the almighty God. He open heartedly admitted the truth to Delilah and brought all curse in his life. He was enslaved by his enemies, became blind and suffered both psychologically and physically. Samson curses himself for his torturous quandary. After he told his lover Delilah the clandestine that his prodigious force comes from his hair, the Philistine Delilah deceived him to the occupying services. Now shorn of his supernatural hair, Samson curses his earlier power. He envisages God put his physical strength in his hair. He feels half dead and a moving grave after losing his eye sight. Milton thus succeeds in projecting the regenerative process of Samson and his inner struggle due to harassment by Philistines. He feels bad that God has rejected and dejected him. In order to liberate his people, he demands the strength from God. He wishes to convert his failure and nervousness into victory with the help of victorious God. Samson was victimized by his own pride. Now he humbles and repents. He loses God's favour and asks forgiveness to God for his sinful life.

Samson's father Manoah enters and the sight of Samson horrifies him. His son was once like one man army and dread of the Israel's foes. Manoah and his wife plead for a child; when Samson was born, everyone congratulated Manoah. Manoah speculates why God cut down his magnificent son. He imagines God shouldn't render enormous men like Samson as a man of polluted disgrace. Samson rebukes his father for inquiring God's customs. God is just and he punishes his people justly. Samson should have learnt from his experiences with Timna not to share secrets. He resisted Delilah's seductive cross-examination thrice but later he revealed the strength in his hairs. Samson's father tried to liberate his son from the clutches of Philistines. Samson refuses this and remained in jail. Manoah warns his son to stop wallowing in self-pity. Samson needs to save himself. Samson wants God to excuse his blunder. Manoah argues that God can give Samson his sight back. After the growth of his hairs, he would receive his strength back.

During the course of action, Samson encounters with his father, Manoah, his seductress Delilah and a robust Philistine warrior, Harapha. This is the journey of Samson from his punishment toward restoration. Samson, the herculean conqueror, deceived by his wife Delilah, loses his potency and is captivated by Philistines. Here Samson is the replica of Milton who trusts in free will. Milton highlights the enormity and humbleness and the intrinsic spuriousness of women. He hears the footsteps of the chorus who were astonished by the appearance of Samson. They see the shabby appearance of Samson and feel pity for his bondage as well as lost sight. Samson recaps his sorrows and thoughtless mistakes. Chorus reminds Samson that intelligent men can commit mistakes as beautiful women play a smarter trick for men.

Rather they suggest to Samson to marry with Danite and not with Palestine. Chorus advises him to have persistence. The readers envisage that Timna betrayed him and later he married Delilah. Chorus also admits that marrying a Philistine woman just for the sake of defending Israel people. Once again Samson blames himself for disclosing the truth to Delilah. The Chorus also hark back Samson not to inquire about the ways of God. Samson asks support from God. The Chorus doubts why God regularly degrades chosen people like Samson, treating astonishing individuals with extra nastiness. Then Chorus announces the advent of Delilah. Samson calls Delilah as a conspirator, a hyena and a snake and sends her away.

He accuses her of poignant exploitation. Delilah defends herself by resorting to a chauvinist trope. Delilah says that she hasn't committed the deed for the sake of money. The Philistines compelled her to take their side. Her love for Samson helped her survive them for a long time.

Delilah doesn't want to dispute with Samson, believing that as a woman she would not win the disagreement. Instead, she wants absolution. She thinks she can acquire the Philistines to liberate him. Then he can live with her and she can concern for him. Samson doesn't want to rely on her. He says that he would get more freedom in chains. When Dalila asks to touch his hand, Samson intimidates to shred her to pieces.

'If you keep safe distance, I will forgive you.'¹³ (Line 955)

Delilah calls Samson as obstinate and contemplates on the duality of recognition: The Israeli people will disgust her but the Philistines will respect her for her dealings.

The Chorus returns and proclaims Delilah's exit. They consider women are stunning but have outward ornament. They do not have inward gifts. (Line 1025-1026). When a female uses her attractiveness to incarcerate a man, she can spin into a thorn and make a man naughty. (Line 1037) Therefore, God has given man despotic power over female. (Lines 1054-1055). The Chorus notices a tempest. Samson asserts that storm (Harapha, the Philistine giant of Gath) and precipitation often disrupt gorgeous days. He wishes he could have wrestled Samson, he possibly would have won. Samson is ready to fight with Harapha in a narrow place but Harapha refuses to wrestle with blind Samson. Here Samson ridicules Harapha's reputation and the admiration of Harapha's leaders, who acted unprofessionally when they bribed Delilah to deceive Samson. Harapha prays to Dagon and asks more power than Samson and would like to triumph over Samson. But Samson demands true power from Israel's God. (Line 1150) Samson believes that God has not abandoned him. God is with him in his sufferings and ready to provide his grace to Samson. Harapha calls Samson as a slaughterer and a robber as he kills 30 philistines. On the contrary, Samson calls Harapha as timid fellow for not fighting him but Harapha leaves. The Chorus returns. They terror Harapha has gone to the Philistines to formulate existence harder for Samson.

A public officer arrives. He wants Samson to display his potency at the feast for Dagon, but Samson rejects. Samson boasts for his spirit of Hebrew and do not want to serve Philistines. (Line 1319) The officer cautions Samson that the Philistines would not like his negation. The Chorus returns and pushes Samson to accept the invitation and serve Dagon. Samson changes his mind. He expects some miracle to be happening from God at the feast. Manoah returns and tells the Chorus that he has met the authorities of Philistines and tries to set his son free with some ransom. But Philistines were against Samson's freedom. All of a sudden, Manoah hears the loud noise of blood, death and deathful deed of feast. The chorus optimistically appreciates the spirit of sacrifice and extreme care of Manoah for his son Samson. He considers the honour

in taking care of his son. He strongly believes that God will return his strength after the growth of his hair. Manoah thinks that Philistines will kill Samson but chorus considers that Samson will kill the Philistines. A distressed envoy arrives with both good and bad news of the death of the Philistines and death of Samson. The theatre was destroyed by the Samson which killed many people. Samson performed miraculous performance. He leaned against two pillars and showed extraordinary thing which causes their death.

The Chorus approves Samson's transactions and divides into two Semi choruses. The first Semi chorus labels the destruction of the Philistines as celestial fury. (Line 1683). The second Semi chorus focuses on Samson. Though blind, he must have found an inward light to perform his valiant deed. They evaluated Samson to a phoenix bird that turns into vestiges and comes back to life. Manoa interrupts the Semi choruses. They wished to discover Samson's corpse, cleanse it, and put in the ground. His father Manoa yearns for building Samson's tombstone. The Semi-choruses reunite into the Chorus, and announce that the story has a happy conclusion. In the end, Samson triumphed. At the end of the drama, the readers get relief and drive out their destructive obsessions and achieve a sense of tranquil.

Conclusion

The major intention of this critical investigation is to evoke psychosomatic reciprocation in reader's mind. Samson Agonistes takes the readers to the truth that Samson had the superhuman strength in his early and captive days too. The evidence we can visualize in his destruction of temple of Dagon along with the Philistines. Instead of cursing his destiny Samson pleaded God, the almighty to offer him energy one more time which leads towards his conviction in Christianity and ecclesiastic sense although he violates God's commandments. Through thematic concerns such as liberty and redeeming hardship the researcher has explored the key aspects of the drama. The drama tells us that in our frailty God's strength fulfils and the aspiration on God never put us to humiliation because our real strength and ambition is found only in the Lord. The present research paper declares the significance of certitude and moral correctness in relationships. Samson's ruination was occurred due to his impotence to discern and belief those who were truly devoted to him.

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