

MORAL AGENCY AND COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY IN PARADISE LOST: A TRIBAL ETHICAL READING FROM CHOTANAGPUR

Clement Lakra^{1*}, Prakash Bhadury²

¹PhD Scholar (English), Reg. No.: 21213712, IIMT University, Meerut, E- mail: c.lakra1943@gmail.com

²Professor of English, IIMT University, Meerut, E- mail: prakashbhadury@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In this paper, a decolonial re-reading of John Milton's work, Paradise Lost, is provided where the main themes of the work, moral agency, free will, and theodicy are re-expressed through a cross-cultural discourse with the local ethics of the Chotanagpur. Conventionally, the epic of Milton has been interpreted in the context of Euro-Christian theologies, especially those that were influenced by the arguments of Augustinianism and Arminianism. This paper would, however, claim that these readings have a propensity to generalise a historically particular, individualised model of moral responsibility (Said 11; Spivak 280). Based on the criticism of epistemic hegemony expressed by Edward W. Said and the need to reorganise epistemics expressed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the paper questions the predilection to believe that the ideas of free will and divine justice, as discussed by Milton, are universal. Rather, it puts into dialogue the theological system of Milton and the relational and ecologically situated ethics of the Chotanagpur tribal cosmology. In this case, moral life is viewed to be structured by balance, interdependence and collective responsibility rather than using juridical guilt. The article reconstructs Eden as a moral-ecological system with the help of ecocritical knowledge (Buell 7) and native epistemology (Smith 45) to consider the Fall not only as a relationship between man and God but also as the entire ecological system. Moral agency in the given context does not regard itself as an independent declaration of individual will but as a type of relationship duty, integrated into communities and environmental systems. The paper, underlining indigenous ethical thinking as a valid theoretical resource, not only sets new conceptual parameters of Miltonic theodicy, but also contributes to the greater project of decolonising literary studies in cross-cultural manners of its interpretation.

Keywords: Adivasi Cosmology; Chotanagpur; Decolonisation; Ecocriticism; Free Will; Indigenous Ethics; John Milton; Paradise Lost; Postcolonial Theory; Theodicy

1. INTRODUCTION

The work of John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, has been viewed as one of the most important literary works discussing moral agency, free will and divine justice in the Western literary tradition. It is put in context by the fact that Milton asserts to defend ways of God to men (Milton I.26). The epic puts the human behaviour in the theological context where obedience, choice and responsibility play major roles during the moral order. In this case, Adam and Eve are granted free will, and the Fall is depicted as an active choice to become disobedient and thus uphold the righteousness of Godly power. Man is sufficient to have stood, as Milton puts it, but at freedom to fall (III.99), a line which has been largely employed to critically dissect the subject of moral responsibility in the poem. But these interpretations have been historically placed within what Edward W. Said terms a hegemonic structure of knowledge, which universalises the Western categories while marginalising other forms of knowledge (Said 11). This hegemony is reflected in Miltonic scholarship in the ongoing focus on Euro-Christian theological paradigms, especially the Augustinian and Arminian controversies, as the major prism through which *Paradise Lost* is understood. Consequently, the concepts by Milton regarding free will, sin, and theodicy are commonly regarded as universal, instead of historical.

The paper refutes this assumption by providing a decolonial interpretation of Book 1 of *Paradise Lost* using the native system of ethics of Chotanagpur. Based on the argument presented by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to state that decolonisation must entail not just the incorporation of marginal voices, but also the restructuring of interpretive frameworks (Spivak 280), this paper seeks to reposition the epic of Milton as a part of a pluralistic epistemic tradition. By so doing, it aims at creating a dialogic interaction between Western theological thinking and indigenous cosmology. Fundamental to this enquiry is a conflict between two models of moral agency. What is understood by the moral responsibility in the theological universe developed by Milton is largely individualistic and juridical; sin is viewed as an act against the divine command, which is manifested in punishment and redemption. Indicatively, when Eve decides to taste the forbidden fruit, it is depicted as an act of free will--herself, though all unwitting--when it highlights individual responsibility in a hierarchical structure ordered and directed by God. However, even though so coherent, this model relies on a two-polar model of obedience versus disobedience, which limits the spectrum of meanings of ethicality.

To the native cosmology of Chotanagpur, moral life, however, is fundamentally relational both with human beings, nature and the spiritual world, existing in a web of reciprocity. Indigenous epistemologies, as proposed by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, are based on shared experiences, ecological interdependence, and focus more on balance and restoration than on judgment and punishment (Smith 45). In this context, moral failure is not regarded as sin in the juridical sense but is a derailment of harmony that requires communal and ecological restitution. The poem *Paradise Lost* by John Milton is one of the most extensive poetic works of the exploration of moral agency, free will, and divine justice in the Western literary tradition. It is enclosed by the intention of Milton to vindicate the ways of God to men (Milton I.26). The epic places the human activity in the context of the theology where obedience, choice, and responsibility are core to the moral order. Here, Adam and Eve are granted the freedom of choice, and their Fall is portrayed as an intentional rebellion, hence supporting the righteousness of God. According to Milton, human beings are, as he puts it, sufficient to have stood, but free to fall (III.99), which has been of great influence to the critical interpretation of moral responsibility in the poem.

Nevertheless, these interpretations have traditionally been placed in the context of what Edward W. Said refers to as a hegemonic structure of knowledge that is universalising on Western categories and de-universalising other forms of knowing (Said 11). This hegemony appears in Miltonic scholarship in the form of the ongoing focus on Euro-Christian theological systems, especially the Augustinian and Arminian controversies, as the main prism through which to interpret the Miltonic work. Consequently, the Miltonian conceptualisations of free will, sin, and theodicy tend to be approached as being universal as opposed to historical. This paper questions such an assumption by providing a decolonial reading of the work *Paradise Lost* with the help of the indigenous ethics of Chotanagpur. Based on the argument by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak that decolonisation must not only include marginalised voices but also restructure interpretive structures (Spivak 280), this paper will seek to reposition the epic of Milton in a pluralistic epistemic space. By so doing, it aims to create a dialogic interaction between Western theological thinking and native cosmology.

Central to this question is a basic conflict between two approaches to moral agency. The moral responsibility in the theological universe of Milton is mostly an individualistic and juridical one; sin is

perceived as a violation of the divine command, and the effects of this violation are explained using punishment and redemption. To put it in perspective, the instance of Eve as she opts to eat the forbidden fruit is a free-will scene in her instance, 'although not necessarily in all the unweaving - fixes herself through all unweeting (IX.997)', and emphasises the personal accountability as a command chain that has been ordained by God. Nevertheless, though this model is logical, it is based on a dichotomy of obedience and disobedience that restricts the extent of ethical interpretation. On the other hand, the Chotanagpurian cosmology of the indigenous moral life sees the moral life as basically relational, with human beings, nature, and the spiritual world in a net of reciprocity. Linda Tuhiwai Smith suggests that indigenous epistemologies are based on mutual experiences and mutual reliance with the environment, in which balance and restoration are emphasised more, instead of judgment and punishment (Smith 45). In this context, moral failure is not considered as sin in the juridical meaning but as a break of harmony that demands a communal and ecological reparation.

This deviation raises a very important re-evaluation of the notion of the Fall. Rather than considering it merely as a single disobedience, the present paper suggests that the Fall may also be interpreted as a more global disruption of relational and ecological harmony. The portrait of the postlapsarian world illustrated by Milton (discord and hostility, X.710/711) implies that the outcome of human activity is not only in the human-divine relationship but in the whole created order. Here, the ecocritical insights come in especially handy. Literary manifestations of nature typically encode ethical interactions between man and nature (Lawrence Buell 7), so that a reading of *Paradise Lost* can be seen as an early manifestation of ecological interdependence.

Thus, the main argument of this paper is that a tribal ethical interpretation of the poem as based on the local cosmology of Chotanagpur restructures the poem with respect to moral agency. Such a solution is a move towards a relational responsibility and collective responsibility model, rather than an individualistic and juridical one. This kind of reading not merely questions the assumed universality of the Miltonian theodicy, but broadens the ethical and interpretive options of the text by situating it in a cross-cultural and ecological context.

By attempting to make this argument, the research paper is part of the larger project of decolonising the study of literature, in the sense that indigenous knowledge systems are not marginal, but central to

the reinterpretation of canonical works. This paper is ultimately aimed at shifting towards a model of moral judgment to a model of ethical coexistence, wherein responsibility is shared, relational, and inseparable from the ecological world within which it is embedded.

2. Literature Review

The intertwined themes of free will and divine providence have always been in the focus of scholarly interest in John Milton and his work on the epic of divine providence, free will, and the epic has been regularly discussed as the theological axis of the epic. Classical interpretations, which were largely shaped by Augustinian theology, emphasise the possibility of human free will and divine omniscience. These interpretations suggest that Milton is able to solve the seeming paradox by claiming that God knows everything before humans, but this does not discount human agency. According to Milton, man is made enough to stand, though free to fall (Milton III.99), a phrase often quoted to justify the belief that moral responsibility arises out of voluntary choice as opposed to predestination.

This concept is also developed by the twentieth-century critics, such as Stanley Fish, who also stresses the experiential dimension of free will in the poem. In *Surprised by Sin*, Fish feels that the method of narration used by Milton makes the reader feel like part of the moral testing process, thereby upholding the theological postulation that sin is a consequence of the wronged freedom (Fish 13). Similarly, Barbara K. Lewalski contextualises the treatment of divine providence by Milton and herself in a broader Protestant context and asserts that the poem eventually agrees that we are witnessing a divinely ordered universe in which human freedom operates within it and not against it (Lewalski 5254). Though the information about the theological consistency of the book, which is presented in these readings, is valuable, to a large extent, they are limited to Euro-Christian paradigms. The current critical school of thought tends to think that the debate of free will and divine justice presented by Milton in all fields of philosophy is valid, and hence, its historical and cultural context is ignored. This is a trend that is suggestive of what Edward W. Said refers to as the hegemonic production of knowledge, which normalises Western epistemologies and places other models of knowledge on the margins.

As a reaction to these constraints, postcolonial criticism has started to challenge the epistemic assumptions of canonical texts. This is particularly true in the case of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who argues that it is decolonisation that must

restructure interpretive structures and not merely fold in the marginal voice. Although the exploration of Milton studies has never been fully operational in this critical step, new understandings in the field have provided new paths of reading and interpretation of the work, *Paradise Lost*, in a more pluralistic intellectual field. Combined with this dynamism, ecocritical approaches have elicited the environmental nature of the Milton epic. According to Lawrence Buell, literary representations of nature code ethical relations of human beings and nature. This position advocates the redefinition of Eden as an ecological and theological space by the scholars. Critics have pointed out that the Fall in *Paradise Lost* brings about spiritual alienation but also leads to material and environmental disorder, suggesting that there is a latent relationship between moral disintegration and lack of ecological balance.

Nevertheless, these readings are often premised on Western ecological thinking and not in contact with the indigenous ecological philosophies. Though these readings provide valuable knowledge on the theological coherence of the theological work in question, called *Paradise Lost*, they are limited to the Euro-Christian paradigms, more or less. The critical tradition that has dominated is tempted into thinking that the free will and divine justice that Milton explores are universally philosophically acceptable, and are therefore not historical and cultural particularism. This tendency can be described as what Edward W. Said calls the hegemonic production of knowledge, in which the epistemologies of the West are naturalised, but other epistemologies are marginalised.

Such limitations have led to postcolonial criticism, in turn questioning the epistemic assumptions of the canonical texts. In this case, the thesis of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is very topical and is referred to as the necessity of decolonisation in terms of reorganising interpretive frameworks, not only the involvement of the marginal voices. This radical shift has been addressed by Milton studies in only half, but new readings of the work, in the broader, more pluralistic intellectual paradigm, have become possible through recent scholarship. Along with this appearance, ecocritical analyses have been highlighted to put emphasis on the environmental side of the epic by Milton as well. Lawrence Buell asserts that the depictions of nature in literature give predetermined codes of morality in the relationship of human beings with their environment. The scholars are provoked by this perspective to re-read Eden both as an ecological and a theological location. Some have observed that the Fall of "*Paradise Lost*" is not merely a

spiritual alienation, but also a material and ecological one, which suggests that there is an intrinsic relationship between moral decadence and ecological imbalance. Nevertheless, these readings may be too oriented towards Western environmental philosophy, without experiencing indigenous environmental philosophies.

The indigenous studies, especially the ones that employ relational ethics and cosmological balance, offer an important yet neglected lens into re-evaluating how Milton approaches the question of free will and divine providence. According to the work by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, indigenous epistemologies are based on the overall responsibility of the collective, the ecological interdependence, and the establishment of the balance, instead of the strict logic of sin and punishment (Smith 45). Moral agency is not some personal quality in these frameworks but a relational practice, which is situated in the community and environment. Although the recognition of indigenous knowledge systems in literary and cultural studies has been on the rise, there has been little application of indigenous knowledge systems to early modern English texts. Particularly, the ethical and cosmological views of such regions as Chotanagpur have seldom been incorporated in the discussions of such canonical works as *Paradise Lost*. This is a large gap since it limits the interpretive potential of the text and continues to uphold Eurocentric ideologies.

Although the topic of free will and divine providence in Milton has been widely discussed in existing scholarship, little focus has been given to the fact that the cross-cultural and indigenous approach may provide new insights into reforming the ideas. The present work tries to address this gap that is so critical, relying on the theological, postcolonial, and ecocritical approaches. It tries to redefine free will not as a system of personal autonomy but as a system of responsibility to each other, and it tries to redefine a divine providence not as a system of judgment but as a principle which can be viewed through the perspective of a balance, coexistence, and shared responsibility.

3. Research Gap

Despite the fact that a lot is already known about the issue of *Paradise Lost*, the relationship between free will and divine providence is still the subject of a controversial discussion within the framework of Euro-Christian theological traditions, especially the ones with the impact of Augustinian or Protestantism. Although these interpretations are philosophical in nature, they have a tendency to generalise the idea of moral agency once presented by Milton as individualistic and juridical, without

considering it within a cultural context. Edward W. Said believes that Western epistemologies are inclined to marginalise other types of knowing (Said 11). Since postcolonial and ecocritical approaches have started to question these dominant presuppositions, they have not yet made a big difference in the underlying ideas of Miltonic theodicy. More to the point, little evidence of native ethical systems, particularly the relational and ecological view of the world of Chotanagpur, is found in Milton studies. The gap fills an empty hole: the lack of a cross-cultural reference point that redefines free will and divine providence according to the collective responsibility and ecological balance. This paper seeks to fill this gap by bringing in a tribal approach to ethics in order to reconsider the morality of *Paradise Lost*.

4. Research Questions

- i. Based on the discussion above and the research gap identified, the following research questions are the following interrelated questions:
- ii. What is the conceptualisation of free will in the book of *Paradise Lost* by John Milton, and how is it resolved with how the divine providence should work in a Euro-Christian theological context?
- iii. How strongly does the model of moral agency as developed by Milton still adhere to an individualist and juridical conception of responsibility, especially in relation to sin, obedience, and divine justice?
- iv. What does the native ethical system of Chotanagpur, in its focus on relationality, ecological harmony, and the collective sense of responsibility, offer as an alternative interpretive grid to reconsider the issue of free will and moral responsibility in the epic?
- v. How does a tribal view reorganise the notion of divine providence into a paradigm of transcendental power and judgment into one of immanence, equilibrium, and restorative order?
- vi. Can the Fall in *Paradise Lost* be construed as a violation of relational and ecological balance and not just as a personal disobedience? What does this mean to our knowledge of moral agency?

5. Objectives of the Study

- i. To answer these questions, the study will seek to accomplish the following objectives:
- ii. To critically analyse the theological ideas of free will and divine providence in the book of *Paradise Lost* with reference to the assumptions of moral agency in individuals.
- iii. To explore the epistemic universality of Miltonic theodicy by contextualising it in terms of its historical and cultural context, through postcolonial critique (Said 11; Spivak 280).

iv. To introduce the native cosmology of Chotanagpur as a valid and theoretically well-founded interpretive scheme, thereby expanding the Miltonic scholarship.

v. To redefine moral agency as an individualistic and relational-accountable and ecological-embedded agency (Smith 45).

vi. To reinvent the meaning of divine providence in a cross-cultural way, by looking at its possible relationship with the concepts of balance, coexistence, and restorative ethics.

vii. To play a part in the larger project of decolonising literary studies by showing the analytical worth of indigenous knowledge systems in the interpretation of canonical Western texts.

6. Theoretical Framework

This paper takes an interdisciplinary and decolonial theoretical approach, which brings together postcolonial criticism, ecocriticism, and indigenous epistemology to redefine the connection between free will and divine providence in the book of *Paradise Lost*. These methods are not independent, but rather are congruent with the main research purpose: to transform an individualistic and juridical conceptualisation of moral agency into a relational and ecologically situated conceptualisation based on the tribal cosmology of Chotanagpur.

On the one hand, postcolonial theory provides the critical tools that are necessary to evaluate the perceived universality of the theology of Milton. Western knowledge regimes have been known to impose themselves as the normative ones at the cost of other types of epistemology, according to Edward W. Said (Said 11). This can be seen in Milton studies, especially in the domination of Euro-Christian theological paradigms, especially those with an Augustinian and Protestant influence, as the main prism through which to comprehend free will and divine providence. This kind of framework predisposes one to consider the concept of moral agency as Milton envisions it as a universal one and obscures its historical and cultural specificity.

To address this weakness, the paper also refers to the concept of epistemic reorganisation by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, which implies that the interpretive frameworks should be changed, and not that marginal voices should be included (Spivak 280). This theoretical shift constitutes a crucial element of the current study, since it will allow the replacement of indigenous knowledge regimes as auxiliary sources of culture, but as equal systems, which can re-establish the principles of Miltonic theodicy. It is against this light that the text of *Paradise Lost* is not viewed as a single

theological paradigm, but as a dialogic text that can be reinterpreted cross-culturally. An interdisciplinary and decolonial approach, which incorporates postcolonial criticism, ecocritical, and indigenous epistemology, is the theoretical approach of this paper that redefines the relationship between free will and divine providence in the context of *Paradise Lost*. These strategies are not practised in vacuums but are designed in accordance with the main research aim to displace an individualistic and jurisdictional conception of moral agency to a relational and ecologically situated conception based on the tribal cosmology of Chotanagpur.

On the second level, ecocriticism adds to the reconceptualisation of moral agency because of the interrelatedness of the ethical and environmental systems. According to Lawrence Buell, literary images of the natural world are an expression of the cultural disposition towards the environment (Buell 7), which is one of the grounds to rethink Eden as an ecological as well as a theological space. The world before the Fall, described in the epic of Milton, is one of harmony, balance, and interdependence, whereas the post-Fall world is no longer that, but full of disorder, degeneration, and enmity (Milton X.710711).

This change suggests that it is not only the human-divine relationship that is prone to moral failure, but that all of the created order is as well. Ecocriticism will help us to determine whether the Fall may be seen as an ecological imbalance, and thus, the extent of divine providence is not limited to a juridical approach. Here, providence can be redefined as the ruling of the divine, as well as a rule that governs the equilibrium of a greater moral-ecological system. Ecocriticism at the second level leads to the reinvention of moral agency in pointing out the relationship between ethical and environmental systems. Lawrence Buell thinks that literary depictions of nature mirror cultural perceptions of the environment (Buell 7), which offers 'a point of departure in re-interpreting Eden as both an ecological and a theological place. The prelapsarian world in the epic by Milton is harmonious, full of balance, and interdependent, whereas the post-Lapsarian world is chaotic, decaying, and violent' (Milton X.710711).

This change shows that the issue of moral failure is not a one-sided issue of human-divine interaction but a global order of creation. Ecocriticism helps us to examine the possibility of the Fall being seen as an ecological disturbance, and thus expand the area of divine providence beyond a purely juridical context. In this sense, it is possible to redefine providence as the form of divine governance and

as a law that determines the balance of a greater moral-ecological system.

The third and most important level, the indigenous epistemology (in particular, the ethical worldview of Chotanagpur), provides a different form of model of moral agency that is grounded in relationality, collective responsibility, and ecological balance. Indigenous knowledge systems are firmly based in experiences of living, collective interdependence, and healing a sense of harmony as opposed to imposing abstract laws, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith highlights (Smith 45).

Moral failure in this sense is not viewed as a theological sin, but as a breach of relationship balance that should be restored, but not punished. This perspective is a direct opposition to the Miltonic model that considers free will to be an individual ability and divine providence to be a system of justice founded on reward and retribution. The Chotanagpur cosmology, on the other hand, locates the agency inside a web of relationships comprising human beings, nature and the spiritual world, thus altering the idea of responsibility as a shared one in the first place. The reconfiguration of the main ideas of the study is possible with the help of a combination of all three theoretical strands. Free will is no longer considered to be an independent power of personal choice but as a relational responsibility that is incorporated within ecological and communal systems. Similarly, divine providence is also being redefined as something transcendental, but as a principle and is connected to the order of balance, co-existence and healing.

In this way, the theoretical framework is not just an addition to the existing Miltonic interpretations, but a form of transformation. In placing *Paradise Lost* into a dialogue with indigenous ethics, the analysis is biased towards a decolonial form of reading, which destabilises epistemic hierarchies and adds to the analytical usefulness of non-Western systems of knowledge. It thereby preconditions a cross-cultural re-thinking of free will and divine providence, one that is no longer individualistic but a more accommodative, relational, and ecologically sensitive view of moral life.

7. Analysis and Discussion

7.1 Free Will, Moral Agency, and Individual Responsibility in *Paradise Lost*

John Milton constructs a theological paradigm in *Paradise Lost*, in which moral agency is grounded on the concept of free will, and the defence of the divine providence. The epic restates several times that human beings have been granted true freedom, and this puts them in full responsibility

for their actions. This is most clearly expressed in Book III, as God says that man was made worthy enough to stand, but free to fall (Milton III.99). This is the main point of the theodicy made by Milton: divine foreknowledge does not imply human action and, thus, it does not undermine moral responsibility. The argument is based on the logic that draws a close line between foreknowledge and predestination. God knows everything that will happen in the future, but this does not mean that He forces human will to a certain decision: Foreknowledge had no place in their fault (III.117). This separation allows Milton to support divine justice and human responsibility. Free will in this context is something that is perceived as a single capacity- an internal ability to make right or wrong decisions in the context of a divinely designed moral order.

fruit is self-determined, that is, she is presented as an author of her own acts, although all unwitting (IX. 997). The fact of a confession does not justify her, but the fact of the ability to discern is not eliminated in the theological context of Milton.

This individualistic model of moral agency is further supported by the next decision that Adam made. Adam, on the contrary, is not deceived; like Eve, he decides with full understanding of what it will lead to. He willingly decides to engage in the Fall, saying that he is ready to face the same destiny as Eve instead of being obedient in solitude (IX.906-916). This is commonly viewed as a show of conjugal love, but in the theological context of Milton, it is an intentional abuse of free will. The argument that Adam gives to defend himself does not diminish his guilt; on the contrary, it makes his guilt even more significant by emphasising the conscious character of his disobedience. These examples demonstrate how far Milton and his vision of free will are bound to an individualistic and hierarchical moral order. The moral responsibility is placed in the autonomous subject, and the moral judgement is organised by binary oppositions- obedience or disobedience, fidelity or transgression. Divine providence is a system that not only allows but also condemns these individual decisions so that, in the end, moral order is restored by punishment and redemption.

This arrangement has been criticised by people such as Stanley Fish, who claim that the reader is not left out of this structure but is immersed in a moral testing process and self-examination (Fish 13). In this perspective, the poem in itself is a learning environment in which the reader finds the repercussions of misjudgement, and thus, this confirms the primacy of free will as a practical and existential reality. On the same note, Barbara K.

However, the legalistic character of this model is also seen. Moral agency is provided as an obedience to the command of God, and sin is an offence of choice. It is highly individualised with decision-making where the responsibility is not shared or relational but rather singular and internalised. This can especially be observed in Book IX, in which the narrative of the Fall idealises the use and failure of free will. The meeting of Eve with the serpent is portrayed as a decision-making process where the subject (desire) is confronted by the object of knowledge (reason) and persuasion (conversation) as a result of their interaction. Milton makes this process very gradual to stress the idea of autonomy: Eve is not forced but rather convinced; she is not imposed but convinced. The internalisation of moral responsibility is emphasised by the fact that her choice to consume the

Lewalski puts Milton and his understanding of free will into a Protestant context that recognises human freedom but subordinates it to divine providence, hence a fine line between autonomy and authority (Lewalski 5254). The next decision made by Adam is another support of the individualistic model of moral agency. Adam is not fooled as Eve was; he chooses with full realisation of its consequences. He is consciously willing to participate in the Fall, telling him that he is willing to share the fate of Eve instead of be an obedient person in seclusion (IX.906-916). This is relevant as it is usually seen as an act of conjugal love, but in the theological context of Milton, it is an intentional abuse of free will. The fact that Adam reasoned does not ease his guilt; on the contrary, it makes his guilt heavier because of the conscious essence of his disobedience.

These scenes highlight the fact that the concept of free will that Milton develops is connected to an individualistic and hierarchical moral order. The sense of responsibility is embedded in the autonomous person, and moral judgment is organised around binary oppositions- obedience, disobedience, fidelity, transgression. Divine providence, then, is a mechanism that not only permits these personal decisions but also makes judgment, so that moral order is eventually reinstated by punishment and redemption.

Opponents like Stanley Fish claim that this form not only covers the characters, but also involves the reader, who is sucked into a moral testing and self-examination process (Fish 1-3). In this sense, the poem itself turns into a didactic field where the reader imagines the outcomes of misjudgement, which confirms the centrality of free will as a reality of life and experience. On the same note, Barbara K. Lewalski puts the way Milton treats free

will in a Protestant context that acknowledges human freedom but subjugates it to divine providence, thereby creating a tightrope between freedom and authority (Lewalski 52–54). The next decision made by Adam supports the individualistic theory of moral agency. Adam does not get deceived as Eve does; he makes his choice knowing the consequences of his actions. He intentionally embarks on the Fall, saying that he is ready to share the destiny of Eve instead of being a good boy who obeys and is alone (IX.90616). The meaning of such an act can be understood as a sign of conjugal love, but in the context of the theology of Milton, it is seen as a conscious abuse of free will. The argument that Adam puts forward does not reduce his guilt; on the contrary, it makes him more guilty as it brings out the consciousness of his disobedience.

These scenes highlight the way in which the conception of free will by Milton is connected to an individualistic and hierarchical morality. The moral judgment is carried in the autonomous person, and the morality is organised in binary oppositions of obedience and disobedience, fidelity and transgression. Divine providence, in its turn, also serves as a system that permits and evaluates these individual decisions so that the order of morality is finally restored in terms of punishment and redemption.

Critics like Stanley Fish claim that this framework not only encompasses the characters but involves the reader who gets involved in a kind of moral testing and self-evaluation (Fish 13 2). In this sense, the poem itself turns into a pedagogical field in which the reader can understand the implications of poor judgment, which supports the importance of free will as an experiential reality. Likewise, Barbara K. Lewalski puts the treatment of free will given by Milton in a Protestant context that acknowledges human freedom but puts it under the control of predestination; therefore, a fine line of autonomy and authority (Lewalski 5254).

This model has some shortcomings as it is viewed by other wider ethical considerations in spite of its philosophical richness. It encourages the moral action to be in alienation with its broader relations and ecologies by making individual autonomy a priority. Although the effects of the Fall are described as having an impact on the natural world- earth felt the wound (IX.782), they are seen through the prism of human sin and divine punishment, as the main ones. Consequently, the poem still has an anthropocentric moral universe where non-human objects are frequently perceived as the continuation of human moral failure as opposed to the active participant of an interrelated moral system.

This is where the necessity of a cross-cultural reconsideration is detected in this study. Even though the discussion of free will by Milton is useful in defending the divine justice in a Euro-Christian context, it does this by relegating moral agency to the freedom of choice and legal responsibility. This leads to a key question: does moral responsibility have different understandings when it is approached as part of an alternative epistemology--an epistemology that values relationality, ecological balance, and collective being?

The solution to this question is more than just within the boundaries of the theological system that Milton operated in, and needs to move towards indigenous ethical systems. This section prepares the groundwork for further analysis by first establishing the inner consistency and constraints of the model of the inner world developed by Milton, and hence introduces the indigenous cosmology of Chotanagpur to the dialogue with *Paradise Lost*. This shift is necessary to reconsider the concept of free will as not an individual capacity but as a kind of relational responsibility within a bigger order that is both moral and ecological.

7.2. Indigenous Ethics of Chotanagpur: Relational Agency, Collective Responsibility, and Reinterpretation of Divine Providence

Whereas *Paradise Lost* is the moral agency developed, on the principles of individual choice and the divine judgment, the local cosmology of Chotanagpur is founded upon an absolutely different moral vision, on the relations, ecological and community-founded. The tribal communities in this area, like the Munda, Oraon, and the Ho cultures, view existence as a continuum of human beings, nature, and the spiritual world. According to this worldview, the moral life is not determined by any abstract laws but by the necessity to ensure a balance in this system of relationships. This approach questions the Miltonic idea that free will is associated with personal autonomy. Chotanagpur cosmology does not have agency that is entirely individualised; rather, it is shared among the community and incorporated into ecological systems. Actions are not perceived as individual decisions made by individuals but as part of the collective- human and non-human-and their effects on it. Indigenous knowledge systems will focus on relational accountability and restoring harmony instead of the legalistic concept of guilt and punishment, as Linda Tuhivai Smith notes (Smith 45).

In this perspective, there is quite a change in the moral failure concept. According to Book 1 of

Paradise Lost, sin can be defined as a lack of obedience to the command of God, and the ramifications of sin are portrayed in the form of punishment, exile, and eventual redemption. On the contrary, the Chotanagpur worldview sees moral transgression as a disruption of balance, a disruption of the mutual relationship between humans, nature, and the spiritual order. In this case, it is not about judgment but rather about restoring balance, the collective healing, rather than personal responsibility. It is a difference that can be radically interpreted to redefine the Fall. Rather than viewing the deeds of Adam and Eve as a mere crime against the divine power, it is possible to assume that it is an intervention of the balance of relationships in a more extensive ecological system. This is already predetermined by Milton when he tells about the short-term consequences of the Fall: Earth felt the pain, and Nature in her seat / Sighing through all her works bore signs of pain (IX.782783). Though eventually the poem puts this upheaval into the perspective of divine justice, the language suggests otherwise, more, more pervasive; the language is referring to an upheaval that resonates quite effectively with native ecological ethics.

Nature is not a mere background of moral life in Chotanagpur, but its active component. The forests, rivers, and land have high spiritual overtones, and human intervention is believed to have a direct influence on the ecosystem balance. All rituals, seasonal festivals and making decisions together are directed towards maintaining this balance. Consequently, responsibility is inherently shared: where one person upsets this balance, it is resolved by communal means of healing, by accentuating the interdependence of all living things.

Applying this point of view to the epic of Milton, the notion of the freedom of will starts to change. Instead of understanding free will merely as the capacity to arrive at autonomous choices, the redefinition of free will can be adopted as the capacity to perform actions as per the duties that are prescribed by relationships. There is no decision-making in a vacuum, and the decisions are made in a web of commitments in which the individual is bound to the society and the world around them. This redefinition does not exclude agency; it only puts them into a broader ethical framework where freedom cannot be talked about outside of responsibility.

It is this opinion that brings about the reconsideration of the divine providence as well. As illustrated in the model by Milton, Providence is a transcendent system which allows freedom of human beings, but ensures that moral order will be

ultimately restored through the intervention of the divine. But, interpreted by the spectacles of Chotanagpur cosmology, providence may be re-imagined as an imminent, not a transcendent thing--as a law of balance in the cosmos. God is not above the creation and is incarnated in the beat of nature and continuity of communal living.

There are a few significant implications of this change to the question of free will and providence. The two concepts are mutually constitutive instead of being in tension, as is the focus of theological discussion. Human beings do contribute to either preserving or disturbing the cosmic harmony, and providence is achieved not through external judgment but by restoring harmony. Responsibility in this perspective is not a duty that is entrusted to divine power but is realised in the lived activities of the community.

It should be noted that this cross-cultural analysis is not intended to obliterate the dissimilarities between Miltonic theology and indigenous cosmology. The Miltonic theology is founded on a monotheistic hierarchical order that values divine sovereignty, whereas indigenous cosmology tends to work in a relational and animistic system that values balance and coexistence. The worth of such comparison has not to do with generating a synthesis, but with dialogue, letting each system illuminate the other with its weaknesses and strengths.

This section fulfils the main research goal of redefining the agency of morality as collective and relational by introducing the tribal moral vision of Chotanagpur. It indicates that the notions of free will, divine providence through an indigenous prism can be re-expressed in a manner that goes beyond the dichotomies of obedience and disobedience, guilt and punishment. This perspective extends the moral horizon in which there is a sharing of responsibility that is relational and related to the ecological world.

The re-orientation is a precondition of a more overarching synthesis in which the knowledge of postcolonial theory, ecocriticism, and indigenous epistemology intersect to create a decolonial reading of the work of Paradise Lost. The reading not only challenges the conventional readings but also reestablishes the topicality of the text in the world, which is increasingly mediated by the ecological crisis and cultural plurality.

7.3 Toward a Decolonial Synthesis: Free Will, Divine Providence, and Relational Ethics

The above-discussed two different but overlapping ethical approaches include the individualistic and juridical concept of moral agency as developed in John Milton's story, Paradise Lost, and the

relational and ecological concept of moral agency found in the indigenous cosmology of Chotanagpur. This part tries to put these frameworks into a head-on clash with each other so as to develop a decolonial synthesis that restructures the ideas of free will and divine providence outside their theological norms.

The focal point of the Milton epic is a well-designed compromise between the freedom of humans and the power of God. Free will is introduced as a personal ability that makes moral free choice, whereas a divine providence guarantees eventual restoration of order with the help of a system of justice. As it has already been determined, this model is based on a strict differentiation of foreknowledge and causality: God knows but does not force people to act (Milton III.117). Moral responsibility is therefore internalised in the subject in question, and moral judgment is done through binary oppositions such as obedience and disobedience, sin and redemption.

The Chotanagpur worldview, on the other hand, questions this dualistic argumentation through the moral agency in terms of a system of relationships that does not solely depend on the individual. Here, there is no single, abstract responsibility, but there is a human, ecological, and spiritual responsibility. Moral failure is not merely an infraction of a divine command, but an imbalance, which spills over into the community of beings as a whole. This line of thought is similar to the claim of Linda Tuhiwai Smith, who says that indigenous epistemologies are more relational in terms of accountability and restorative practices than jurisdictional systems of guilt and punishment (Smith 45).

These two models are put under tension; the weaknesses of the Miltonic framework are more evident. Although its focus on individual autonomy offers a consistent account of the defence of divine justice, it has the tendency to separate the moral action from the wider ecological and communal contexts. Although Milton does not deny the ecological impact of the Fall, as he recognises the effect of the Fall on the Earth, namely, Earth felt the wound (IX.782), the impact of the Fall is, nevertheless, in the end, subordinated to the story of human sin and the divine punishment. The non-human world in this moral structure is mostly perceived to be reactive as opposed to constitutive.

The conflict in *Paradise Lost* can also be interpreted in a new way. This re-conceptualisation of free will as relational agency, rather than autonomy, makes it possible to look through the prism of indigenous ethics to understand the idea of free will as an ability that is practised within a network of

interdependence. In this context, choice is irrevocably linked to the responsibility towards the other and the natural world. In this way, the actions of Adam and Eve can be seen not only as the disobedience but also the disturbances of a greater ecological and relational system.

Equally, the notion of divine providence also experiences a major change in this multi-cultural reading. Milton has a trans-theological understanding of the notion of providence; it is a form of external force that governs and judges human behaviour. However, in the Chotanagpur view, providence can be re-defined to be immanent, based on rhythms of nature and the community life. Instead of being a tool of divine control, it is a part of the balancing, which is kept and disrupted by human participation. This change does not refute the theological vision of Milton but puts it in a wider ethical perspective. The apparent opposition between free will and divine providence, which is the main debate of Christian thought, is not adversarial when the two concepts are viewed relationally. Free will does not oppose providence anymore; on the contrary, it is a means of balance that can be maintained or broken. In this sense, human agency does not exist in opposition to the functioning of a larger moral-ecological order, but forms a portion of it.

The postcolonial theory of the critique of the epistemic privilege of Euro-Christian frameworks is the foundation of this synthesis. Edward W. Said states that the prevailing systems of knowledge tend to present themselves as universal and reject any other forms of reasoning. This paper refutes that paradigm and shows that non-Western epistemology can also present equally rigorous and informative readings of canonical texts by introducing indigenous cosmology into the discussion of what could be called *Paradise Lost*. Besides, the ecocritical views strengthen the need for this re-orientation. The emphasis on the environmental representation, as emphasised by Lawrence Buell, points out the extent to which the epic by Milton is already leading towards an interrelated moral universe. Integration of indigenous ecological ethics does not impose an external framework on the text, but adds dimensions which are already present in the text.

The synthesis below is not merely a mixture of two viewpoints or a direct substitution of one model with another. Rather, it is a dialogic model where Miltonic theology and Chotanagpur cosmology can be seen to complement each other in their strong and weak aspects. On the one hand, Milton describes the ethical importance of human choice in the context of personal responsibility. In their turn, indigenous ethics contribute to such decisions

by basing them on a community and ecological setting.

Lastly, this decolonial synthesis changes the relationship between free will and divine providence more holistically. The idea of free will may be taken to mean the relative responsibility, and the idea of divine providence is the rule of moderation in an interdependent moral universe. This reconfiguration not only responds to the key research questions of the work but also plays a role in the wider re-examination of the ethics in a world of ecological crisis and cultural diversity. Going beyond the Eurocentric interpretations, this section will show that "Paradise Lost" may be read as the theological epic of personal fall and redemption, and, in the cross-cultural dialogue, it can also be read as a text that is rich in understanding the collective aspects of moral life.

8. Conclusion

This work reconsiders the connection between free will and divine providence in John Milton in the context of the tribal ethics of the indigenous cosmology of Chotanagpur in his work, *Paradise Lost*. Going beyond the Euro-Christian paradigm, it claims that the moral agency developed by Milton, though philosophically consistent, is based on the

individualistic and juridical paradigm that constrains the moral interpretation. The paper has shown the value of the indigenous epistemology to challenge the Miltonian theology to show that the concept of moral responsibility is more relational and collective as opposed to individual. This redefinition of the Fall focuses on it as a violation of ecological and communal harmony, and not merely a form of disobedience. This leads into new frontiers of thinking on free will and providence. Free will is perceived as an accountability of relationships in this framework, and divine providence is reconstituted as a principle of sustenance in an interlinked moral universe. This is not to supersede the theological vision of Milton, but to enhance its interpretative potentials by cross-cultural interaction. By so doing, the study would add to the decolonisation of literary studies by demonstrating the intellectual rigour and critical generativity of indigenous knowledge systems. Conclusion: It argues in the end that, when read outside of the conventional limits, *Paradise Lost* provides a defence of divine justice, but also a more profound reflection upon the shared and ecological aspects of moral being.

REFERENCES

1. Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Harvard University Press, 1995.
2. Fish, Stanley. *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*. 2nd ed., Harvard University Press, 1998.
3. Lewalski, Barbara K. *Paradise Lost and the Rhetoric of Literary Forms*. Princeton University Press, 1985.
4. Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. Edited by Alastair Fowler, 2nd ed., Longman, 2007.
5. Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Penguin Books, 2003.
6. Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. 2nd ed., Zed Books, 2012.
7. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313.