



## SAMSON AGONISTES: THE EMBODIMENT OF CONFIDENCE AND WILL POWER

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### ABSTRACT

John Milton dealt with the character Samson Agonistes to present his mental disturbance. Through this character the same kind of mental disturbance of the poet is perceivable as like Samson he was confined and also became blind. But for a character of extreme will power the hidden rage becomes his strength. In this paper it is explored how Samson faced every adversities of life and consequently gained confidence, will power and faith only to carry out the call of God. This idea is emphasized while going through the tragedy named "Samson Agonistes".

**Keywords:** Samson Agonistes, John Milton, Confidence, Will Power, God

### INTRODUCTION

John Milton (1608-1674) was the last Renaissance poet with vast knowledge of ancient Rome and Greece. He belonged to the unstable political situation of the contemporary Age. He witnessed the establishment of non-monarchical Government after the Charles' trial and execution in 1649 [1]. The closing of Public Theatre in London in 1642 gave the scope for non-dramatic literature. Along with it, choosing a Biblical character, creating psychological expressions and emphasizing on speech and development of character through conversation with descriptions of past acts provide ample scope for Milton to express his mind. It is a known fact that Samson in this tragedy 'Samson Agonistes' becomes the mouth speech of Milton [2]. Throughout the play the protagonist sometimes mourned deeply and sometimes recovered from it. But it is the gradual process of self development where the protagonist regenerates himself from the

unbearable suffering to the attainment of authority on God, and gaining the extreme confidence and will power to face the extreme adversities of life.

### DISCUSSION

The story that underlies Milton's plot in Samson comes from the Biblical book of Judges, chapters 13-16. Milton added characters to the biblical story (Harapha the arrogant carpet-knight giant and the Public Officer), ignored some (Samson's mother), inflated others (Samson's father), but the most significant change was to make Dalila Samson's legally wedded wife. Judges 16:4 describes Dalila as a Philistine woman "from the vally of Soreck" whom Samson "loved" sometime after having gone "in unto" a "harlot" in Gaza (16:1) [3].

Flavius Josephus, in his Jewish Antiquities 5:306 writes the following: " (Samson) at length transgressed the laws of his country, and altered his own regular way of living, and imitated the strange customs of foreigners, which thing was the

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beginning of his miseries; for he fell in love with a woman that was a harlot among the Philistines: her name was Delilah, and he lived with her." Paradise Lost refers once to Delilah as a harlot (Paradise Lost 9.1060). In this poem, however, Milton re-casts Dalila as Samson's "Traytress" wife, perhaps the most perfect example in every particular of the "unfit and mistak'n wife" Milton described in his Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce of 1644. It may be helpful to regard Samson as achieving a sort of heroism Adam could not: Samson divorces his unfit wife [3].

The plot of the dramatic poem comes from Judges 13-16. Orgel and Goldberg think that in choosing his plot, Samson's last days, Milton imitates Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus[4].

From the very beginning of the tragedy, Samson was conscious about his act of disobedience to God. Still Samson showed his faith to the judgement of God. The speech of the Chorus at the beginning drew a word picture of the past glory of Samson to contrast the present wretched condition of him. In spite of frequent mentions of his past power, pomp and glory, Samson showed slight but steady existence of faith, confidence and will power to take revenge on the Philistines, as he said with his ultimate faith in God,

"But peace, I must not quarrel with the will  
Of highest dispensation, which herein  
Haply had ends above my reach to know  
[Samson Agonistes, Lines: 60-62]

Samson is a Nazarite who have to obey certain moral principles and was not even allowed to marry [5]. In his personal life he was disobedient to God, married twice and had broken the moral principles. As a result he was condemned to everlasting suffering throughout his life by God. Who can raise question to the judgement of God? Samson also dared not to do so, as he said to his father -

"Appoint not heav'nly disposition, Father  
Nothing of all these evils hath befall'n me  
But justly; I myself have brought them on" [Samson Agonistes, Lines: 373-375]

His wretched condition can be compared to the permanent punishment of Adam and Eve or that of Satan. Samson put forward -

"O indignity, o blot

To Honour and Religion! Servile mind  
Rewarded well with servile punishment!  
The base degree to which I now am fall'n"  
[Samson Agonistes, Lines: 411-414]

While remembering his wives and their misdeeds it seemed that Samson was gathering mental strength to take revenge on them. Out of hatred on his own self, he was preparing to destroy his enemies anyhow. Samson was such a person who agreed with his father and frankly admitted his mistake. Before gaining the highest level of confidence and will power against the Philistines, the mental disturbance was quite perceivable when he sometimes expressed his anger and become impatient and sometimes he surrendered himself to the will of God. In Paradise Lost, Milton tried to redefine heroism as "Patience and Heroic Martyrdom" (Paradise Lost 9.32); Samson's tragic heroism is similarly an inward sort. Whether or not his outward action counts as heroic depends upon how we evaluate the "rouzing motions" that prompt it (Samson 1382) [6]. During his conversation with his father, Samson for the first time uttered his utmost desire which was the complete destruction of Dagon and other Philistines [Samson Agonistes, Lines: 461-470]. Through this speech it is seemed that all the hidden rage and sorrow came to the mouth to pronounce the very desire of Samson. From here Samson started to contemplate for the complete ruin of his enemies.

Then came the temptation from his father to be free from the bondage of the enemies but Samson showed his mental strength when he admitted that he wanted to sacrifice himself to save the Jews from the bondage of Philistines as a compensation of his mistake. Presence of temptation at the path of achievement is something which must be overcome. The mental strength of Samson had defeated his mental crisis which was created by the temptation to be free as both his father and wife Dalila assured him so.

While dealing with his father Manoa, we could perceive the beginning of outbursts of his rage born out of his depression, as he said-

"My grief not only pain me  
As a ling'ring disease,  
But finding no redress, ferment and rage,

Nor less than wounds immedicable  
Ranckle, and fester and gangrene  
To black mortification" [Samson Agonistes,  
Lines: 617-622]

Here the description of Samson's agony and grief was very touching. The inner agony for the drastic change of his life tormented him so much that he did not want to heal it anyway. The Death would bring solace to his heart. But to him the meaningless death would torment him more. So anyway or other he wanted to die a meaningful death or he wanted to sacrifice his life for the sake of his countryman.

Then while dealing with Samson, Dalila went on blaming him for his own condition. At first Dalila said that he was unable to resist evil and keep faith in God. Then she described the act of violation of trust for the sake of virtue, truth and duty to her nation. At last she offered to make him free from prison for the sake of her love for him. Because of his confidence, intelligence and rage that Samson got ready for the counter attack. He was blind but the inner rage showed his stand against the wrong and his hatred for the woman from Philistines, named Dalila [Samson Agonistes].

Samson refused to be cared by this wanton woman. The whole argument appeared to be false to him. He neither heard her plea of love nor strong causes to be apologized for. Each and every time he showed the due confidence, will power and did not become weak and helpless even in this wretched condition. It seemed that he only nourished anger and urge for revenge in any way haunted him most. It was at last that God would give him the opportunity for his revenge. This time no mistake by him would bring the tragic end of this tragic figure, named Samson.

As Dalila said in her 7<sup>th</sup> speech [Samson Agonistes, lines: 963-966]:

"Thy anger, unappeasable, still rages,  
Eternal tempest never to be calm'd.  
Why do I humble thus myself, and suing  
For peace, reap nothing but repulse and hate?"

Dalila said this from which we came to know about the anger and rage of Samson, and also his confidence about the ultimate destruction of the Philistines. Here, Dalila acted only as a tool to bring

out the inner wrath of Samson. It was with the conversation with Dalila that the hatred of Samson reached the pick point. From here was started the journey of destroying the Philistines.

Samson's rage was such that he desired for an open combat with Harapha. He said him to come, equipped with many weapons and he would face him with a stick made of oak [Samson Agoniste]. Here Samson urged his ultimate faith in God which was the very source of his confidence, will power and strength. As he said [Samson Agonistes, Lines: 1139-1141]:

"I know no Spells, use no forbidden Arts;  
My trust is in the living God who gave me  
At my Nativity this strength,

In conversation with Harapha came the question to justify the ways of God to men. From the beginning of this tragedy we faced the question frequently and somehow or other in those cases Samson was involved to raise the question against the judgement of God. But here Harapha raised the question on the power and judgement of God and Samson seemed to forget about his doubt and started defending God. Here Samson, in one sense, was one like Phoenix who became depressed, helpless, disappointed, tired but resolute person who knew how to be reborn from the own ashes to the call of God [Samson Agonistes, Lines: 1687-1691].

He was also a kind of believer of God who opposed God, raised question on Him, and then logically solved it. He was really a courageous person who possessed the ability to be one with the God as he placed his demand to the God. Here trust on God was so powerful that dependence became authority. He said to Harapha [Samson Agonistes, Lines: 1171-1177]:

Justly, yet despair not of his final pardon  
Whose ear is ever open; and his eye  
Gracious to re-admit the suppliant;  
In confidence whereof I once again  
Defy thee to the trial of mortal fight,  
By combat to decide whose god is God,  
Thine or whom I with Israel's Sons adore.

#### CONCLUSION

In spite of his faith, confidence, and will power, Samson, sometimes became so depressed that he found respite only in the thought of death. Here the

idea of escapism is noteworthy as he was ready to welcome even an enemy for death [Samson Agonistes, Lines: 1263-1267]. This rational feeling is mingled with the character in such a way that he deserves our pity for him. But a heroic character is not born to repent only. Again he proved his superiority when he entered the threshold of extreme mental power with the help of patience and faith of God [Samson Agonistes, Lines: 1287-1296].

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