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## Reading Eva Figes' The Tree of Knowledge as a Historiography of Milton

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### ABSTRACT

The paper proposes to understand Milton as a failed father. The novella is a brilliant portrayal of the ruminations of an old woman who has had a very tough existence owing to her father's negligent attitude towards his daughters. The unkind father about whom Deborah Milton rambles wins the sympathy of the readers since her tales merge with the historical incidents, her father's role in it and how his puritanical ideals had almost destroyed her life. The saving grace is the close resemblance she has with her father and her unparalleled ability to imitate like a parrot the lines of some of the time-tested lines in Greek and Latin. The few academicians who come to see her are moved by her pitiable state and their generosity keeps the coals burning at home.

**Keywords:** Idealistic woman, Knowledgeable woman.

**The Tree of Knowledge** by Figes is a pathetic recollection of the injustices meted out to the girl children in the Miltonic household. Figes creates a fictional Deborah Milton who voices out the travails of a daughter under the stern and loveless upbringing by her iconic father and literary giant Milton. Milton's patriarchal attitude had denied his daughters their rightful existence, especially Deborah Milton who lived long enough to suffer acute poverty owing to her father's prejudice. A learned scholar himself saw no meaning in imparting to his daughters the beauty of languages he had known. His daughters could have well been educated but for his puritanical temperament.

The novella poses itself as a historiography in so far as it focuses on a socio-historically important figure Milton himself. Sanchez observes that the novel is a "kind of historiography because it focuses

on the private and everyday life than the public and extraordinary" (116). Sanchez affirms that Figes' deployment of history with Deborah Milton's story as a case study reveals the way in which history becomes precisely the history of the writer who writes it. One could see in it how certain events become historical facts; how particular people achieve historical notoriety or ultimately decide the stories. It contains the truths of certain people becoming more relevant than other stories. History constitutes itself not only as an asset of grand narratives about great men like Milton projected as god-like, but also some King in a closed system who has traditionally excluded women because of their alleged unworthiness in historical times.

Figes also agrees that women have been alienated from recreating, rewriting or appropriating a literary tradition with no room for positioning women either

as a historical subject or a maker of historical meaning. She establishes her conviction that “any historical event can be narrativised and can be given a sense of ineluctability and history as such contains the potential to teach generations the moralising dimensions” (qtd in Sanchez 116-7). Sanchez notes that Figes has ingeniously blended ‘biographical data’ in weaving or rewriting the story of a father whose parenting is fiercely prejudiced and the daughter suffers repressive and oppressive treatment giving her no space. Deborah’s story gains significance, as she positions herself either as a historical subject or a maker of history or maker of historical meaning being rightfully the daughter of a scholarly father. Deborah’s narrative is credible and not falsified because reality stands as a testimony to her fate.

The novella is a monologue in which the old Deborah Milton, the narrator recounts as she relives her past as an unloved daughter to her father. Her father, she recalls was both cruel and blind to even notice the harm he was doing to them. To the world at large, Milton had proved his genius in verse and by the power of his pen had even impacted the English Revolution. As a father, it is evident that he failed, in toto, leaving his daughter in abject poverty. He had married twice much to the dismay of his daughters and thereby denied them their rightful inheritance. The daughters had neither education nor means to live by.

Deborah, the most patient and dutiful daughter had become a proxy writer as Milton became blind. She had in her memory all the Greek and Latin poetic lines dictated by her father, by heart. It was this ability of hers that attracted a few scholars to pay her a visit to see, know and hear her utter her father’s time-tested lines. The visitors, mostly academicians and scholars offered her some money which was her only source of survival.

Her father taught his nephews Vitruvius, his *Architecture* and Frontinus, his *Stratagem*. Untaught as she was, she found reading the classics a tiresome duty, she complains that had she known what it was that she was reading, it would have eased her weary soul. She needed the patience of a saint to read Latin and Greek, she confesses ‘being flesh and blood and young also’. She later understood that she was reading about ‘a golden age where all mankind lived at peace with one another’ (TK, 5). She records that her grandfather did wisely in

educating his sons, he sent Christopher to study Law and Milton to the Church. He knew that the purpose of education was to ‘rise in the world’. Her father had an enriched education travelling and studying for studying sake that made him a scholar. She complains mildly, “I would have been given mere crumbs from such a rich table, if not to keep my body from want, then my soul from hunger” (TK, 9). She also knew that her heart was not in mastering culinary or stitching skills, since she failed to master it. She recalls how her uncle did dread going to school, while he preferred to dream of ball games, flying kites, etc. But soon “his fancy would be halted as his eyes caught the warning *Aut doce aut disce aut discede* which in translation meant like, teach or leave and soon his wondering eyes came back to his books” (TK, 10).

Deborah Milton enjoyed teaching but ironically, she only wished she knew more to teach. Her predicament had been deplorable since Milton made his hatred for his daughters obvious. Deborah learnt from the old maid that Mary was such a magpie she would chatter and be gay even as a country thrush till she heard her husband’s voice. Milton failed to understand his wife. She felt that she must be wooed for easy riding with tender and cosy words. Milton sent a messenger to bring back Mary Powell, which was taken lightly by the Powells. She says how her father’s treatise on divorce shocked her grandma that she convinced Mary to return when the civil war ensued. Deborah argues that it is not wholly her mother’s fault to stay away from home; there are two sides to every coin, so the fault was not with her mother alone.

Besides I have heard my grandma say her daughter was sent away, my father not liking her conversation, and thinking he had made a ill bargain, the dowry being unpaid, and the girl having nothing but foolishness in her young head, which had captured him with fresh looks and youthful prettiness. And so he thought her unfit companion for his gravity and serious ambition (TK, 22).

Milton felt that untaught women made bad wives to scholars like him, yet he punished his daughters born of her by marrying them without dowry and in the least bit educating them. “Surely it is foolish hope that we should converse wisely if we are kept ignorant?” (TK, 22). She recalls how his divorce document was

unfair where women like" discarded garment were thrown out at pleasure" (TK 23). Mary returned to live another seven years after returning because the divorce document sent her packing back. Deborah recalls that death was the only escape for her mother from Milton, with "no love how could a woman remain without scare and endure" (TK31).

Deborah's voice of protest is heard by occasional visitors who come to see the living daughter of the great legend,

If the listener is not the visitor it is her daughter who is an audience, she is so thrilled by a simple generosity of the visitor who left, there is hope as it will help them much. She recalls the political upheaval that shook England and her father's role in it. Being a thorough believer in rule by God's elect, he raised his voice against monarchy, Those chosen men would rule who heard the voice of God, Deborah ridicules that how could one be sure whether they heard the voice of God or Satan. Women were simple spectators taking on what was coming, though they could judge the fault of the two factions (TK, 55).

His drafts on Divorce actually triggered off men to divorce their wives 'it seems that others took my father's word as law and laid aside their spouses to take another, thinking conscience only as their, which was in fact mere lust or lack of liking" (TK, 69). His views on prepublication and press censorship were another major fallback, since as Deborah conceived it as a selfish end to protect what was gained. There is logic in her stance that progress by repression is but a poor way forward... "Men who cry liberty, silence their wives and daughters without a thought and those who serve them" (TK, 72). They believed in freedom but did much to curb the freedom of others. She says that it has been a folly to fear and to hear other people's argument 'in order to refute it'. She adds that her father had won the cause "to make tedious for the commoners he being a visionary yet failed to understand that the ancients held it grievous for men to think themselves like unto gods ,or greater than they were, for which due punishment would follow" (TK, 83). The writer "put the blame on lesser men, and if he could, on women, these being least of all. Delilah, Eve, or my poor mother, his daughters at last" (TK, 84). It may be described that this is no

way to win the lesser sort, either to love them or to bring them to second paradise.

The daughters will have the following kind of reasoning when it comes to ridding oneself of ignorance and want of education.

"Those with greater learning must seek to raise the ignorant, else we shall never see a better world. But do it tenderly and not with scorn I do not say I might have been the equal of my father, but I would have sought to lift me to his level, for fondness sake. I might have loved him then, and he got his reward (TK, 87).

As an aged woman she has enough courage and takes delight in educating her granddaughter and her friend Lisa and Susan to live in peace and unity. She narrates the story of the fight between the royalists and commoners and how their fight was a wasted one. She repeats the historical event with dogs, sheep and wolves making historical detail interesting to the young girls warning them against dispute. "This little one was a tale told to me in my childhood, against quarrelling by those that should be friends. Mind it well, such fables come from truth and should instruct us" (TK 110-11). Deborah is worldly-wise, even though she is not educated. She takes delight in equipping little girls and boys about peace and unity.

The untimely death of Lisa, an eight year old chubby little girl, makes Deborah remorseful .She is so embittered that she regrets her unhappy childhood days. Very late in life comes to her the recognition of being Milton's daughter, and she has also acknowledged what her cousin Edward had said in honour of his beloved uncle. Though she was unloved, she says "I think fondly of him who fathered me pitying his faults" (TK, 115). She is ever willing to read and illustrate her skill of reading ancient texts to prove that she is not a liar because the world generally, like Milton himself, estimates women of "being oft thought teller of untruth by very nature, sinning most when telling tales of our most sainted men, whom history reverses. My father now is such, and so they would not think him cruel to his daughters" (TK, 114).

She recalls her father's statement about women that they were 'our misfortune' and would claim with arrogance that Eve was made from Adam's rib; the Hebrew word for rib was *tsela* ( misfortune). She

says her father used his superior knowledge 'as a thorn to goad us'. Though she is proud of her father's scholarship, she regrets that had he saved a penny for each and every candle he burnt his books, "I would have been a fine lady now, with servants of my own" She understands that 'they (the daughters) were kept ignorant to keep them in servitude' (136). She is reminded of her faithful old maid who was shown the door for speaking on their behalf

These girls are innocent of wrongdoing and I must speak for them for they are used and spurned, and sorely tried both day and night, and have watched it long with aching heart. If love is blind, self-love is blinder far, and you have lacked in duty to your children that are forever calling them unkind undutiful to you (TK, 132-33).

Deborah might have inherited her father's genius but it goes unattended, because she herself as a young lady was convinced that the proper condition for a woman is to be anonymous. Milton's malevolence as a failed father and status of a celebrated patriarch reveals tension and the lacunae in his image. He was blind both figuratively and literally to believe that women were no more than Eves. Deborah had nothing to feel proud of being the daughter of an eminent poet, with neither inheritance nor skill by which to live by.

## REFERENCES

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