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The Will to Resist: A Meditation on ‘To Be Weak Is to Be Miserable’

Jayantakumar Panda

Abstract

This paper analyzes a passage from Book 1 of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, focusing on Satan’s infamous assertion, “To be weak is miserable.” Through the lens of nine scholarly sub-topics—ranging from literary devices and poetic structure to philosophical, historical, and personal elements—this study unpacks the textual richness and ideological complexity of this passage. It highlights how Milton uses Satan’s voice as a rhetorical and theological device, presenting profound questions on free will, resistance, divine justice, and the nature of evil. Furthermore, the study explores how the poem intersects with spiritual and moral philosophies, including Christian, Vedantic, and Upanishadic thought, thus offering a multidimensional framework for interpretation.

Preface

John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* remains one of the most towering achievements in English literature and Christian epic poetry. Among its many profound and provocative passages, the extract beginning with “*To be weak is miserable, Doing or Suffering*” captures the defiant voice of Satan as he rallies the fallen angels in the aftermath of their expulsion from Heaven. More than a mere declaration of rebellion, this speech is a window into the psychology of cosmic revolt, existential pride, and the tragic beauty of misdirected will. This passage is not only rich in literary devices and epic grandeur, but it also invites deeper contemplation on the nature of strength, suffering, free will, and resistance to divine order. When placed in dialogue with Eastern philosophical and spiritual traditions—especially the **Upanishads**, **Vedanta**, **Bhagavad Gita**, **Shrimad Bhagavatam**, and the **Vachanamrut**—the speech resonates with powerful contrasts. While Satan glorifies strength through resistance and ego, Vedantic wisdom extols strength through surrender, self-realization, and detachment. This paper, therefore, approaches the extract as a multidimensional reflection of human struggle: the desire for autonomy, the anguish of separation from the divine, and the paradoxical condition of being both powerful in will and powerless against cosmic law. In doing so, it aims to illuminate the profound moral, metaphysical, and spiritual tensions that Milton’s poetry evokes—and which ancient Indian wisdom traditions also grapple with in their own ways.

1. Literary Devices and Figures of Speech

Milton’s language is laden with literary richness. This passage features:

- **Metaphor:** “Fall’n Cherube” symbolizes the cosmic descent of Satan from divine glory to hellish ruin. The line “To be weak is miserable” metaphorically defines weakness as an existential curse.
- **Personification:** Abstract forces are animated, e.g., “His inmost counsels” and “sulphurous hail” being described with agency.

- **Imagery:** Visual imagery like “livid flames,” “fiery surge,” and “dreary plain” creates a terrifying picture of Hell.
- **Alliteration:** “Sulphurous hail shot,” “fiery flood,” and “dreary, desolate, void” use repeated consonants for sonic emphasis.
- **Irony:** Satan’s statement that “to do ill our sole delight” shows a perverse inversion of divine purpose, highlighting moral irony.
- **Symbolism:** The “fiery waves” and “gates of Heaven” symbolize the struggle between damnation and redemption.
- **Oxymoron:** “Hope from despair” reflects the contradictory emotions fueling Satan's rebellion.

2. Structure and Form

- **Blank Verse:** Milton uses unrhymed iambic pentameter, giving the poem an epic, elevated tone while allowing natural speech rhythm.
- **Enjambment:** Many lines carry meaning beyond line breaks, such as:
“Our labour must be to pervert that end, / And out of good still to find means of evil;”
This propels the narrative and thought fluidly.
- **Epic Form:** As part of an epic, the poem follows conventions such as invocation, elevated diction, and heroic struggle, though ironically inverted through Satan's voice.

3. Theme and Subject Matter

The passage explores multiple profound themes:

- **Rebellion vs. Submission:** Satan refuses to accept divine punishment, choosing to rebel rather than repent.
- **Good vs. Evil:** The inversion of moral order is central; Satan seeks to “pervert” divine good.
- **Free Will and Determinism:** Satan chooses defiance, suggesting autonomy even in damnation.
- **Suffering and Strength:** Strength is exalted as redemptive; weakness is cursed.

4. Tone and Mood

- **Tone:** Defiant, intense, strategic, philosophical. Satan speaks as a fallen general plotting his next move.
- **Mood:** The atmosphere is heavy, apocalyptic, and grim, but also laced with ambition and dark resolve.

5. Philosophical and Spiritual Interpretation

This section of *Paradise Lost* resonates with multiple philosophical and spiritual dimensions:

- **Christian Theology:** The doctrine of *felix culpa* (“fortunate fall”) is implicit—God brings good even from evil. Satan’s effort to “pervert that end” mirrors the Augustinian notion of evil as the absence or corruption of good.
- **Bhagavad Gita:**

- Satan's speech contrasts Krishna's teachings in **Gita 2.47–2.50**¹, where detachment from outcomes and righteousness are advocated. Satan, by contrast, is fully attached to outcome and revenge.

- His desire to “disturb His inmost counsels” is the opposite of **Gita 3.19**², where Krishna advises action in accordance with divine will.

• Upanishads:

- Satan’s identity as a “Fall’n Cherube” who seeks to “resist” the supreme will stands against the **Isha Upanishad’s** teaching: “He who sees all beings in the Self and the Self in all beings... hates none” (Isha 6–7).

• Vedanta and Vachanamrut:

- The **Vachanamrut (Gadhada I-56)** emphasizes that surrender to God leads to bliss, while resistance leads to misery—precisely what Satan experiences in his isolation and suffering.
- Satan’s misery from “doing or suffering” echoes Vedantic teachings that attachment to ego (*ahamkara*) leads to bondage.

Thus, Milton’s Satan becomes a dramatic representation of *avidya* (ignorance), *ahamkara* (egoism), and *duhkha* (suffering).

John Milton’s extract from *Paradise Lost*, Book I—especially the lines beginning with “**To be weak is miserable, Doing or Suffering**”—offers profound philosophical material that, though rooted in the Christian epic tradition, can be strikingly aligned (or contrasted) with ideas found in **Upanishadic, Vedantic, Bhagavad Gita, Vachanamrut, and Puranic** scriptures. Below is a comparative spiritual-philosophical analysis across these traditions.

Alignment with Upanishadic and Vedantic Wisdom

1. The Nature of Strength and Weakness:

Milton’s Line: “*To be weak is miserable, Doing or Suffering...*”

Vedantic Insight:

- According to Vedanta, weakness is rooted in **avidya** (ignorance of the Self). Real strength lies not in rebellion or ego-driven action but in **ātma-jñāna** (Self-realization).

• Shvetashvatara Upanishad 6.11:³

“*Tam eva viditvāti mṛtyum eti nānyaḥ panthā vidyate ’yanāya*”

(*Only by knowing Him, one transcends death; there is no other path to liberation.*)

This stands in contrast to Satan’s refusal to submit to divine wisdom. His suffering is a result of **spiritual ignorance** and misplaced ego (*ahamkara*).

Vachanamrut, Gadhada II-51:

“A person who is weak in the knowledge of God becomes miserable by even the slightest adversity.”

This matches Milton's theme but the **remedy in Vedanta** is surrender and knowledge—not defiance.

2. Egoism and Resistance to Divine Will:

Milton's Line: "But ever to do ill our sole delight, As being the contrary to his high will Whom we resist."

Bhagavad Gita:

• Gita 3.6–7:⁴

"He who restrains the organs of action but dwells in his mind on the objects of senses, he is a deluded hypocrite."

"But he who controls the senses through the mind and begins to work with Karma Yoga, is superior."

• Satan's delight in doing evil for its own sake is a manifestation of **tamas (darkness)** and **rajas (egoic action)**, whereas the Gita exhorts action in alignment with **dharma and divine will (Ishvara-arpana)**.

Katha Upanishad 1.2.23:⁵

"nāyam ātmā pravacanena labhyo na medhayā na bahunā śrutena..."

(The Self is not attained through much learning or intellect, but only by one whom the Self chooses. To such a person, the Self reveals Itself.)

Satan's rebellion reflects pride in **intellect and will**, which Vedanta sees as obstacles to true knowledge without humility and surrender.

3. Free Will vs. Divine Providence:

Milton's Line: "If then his Providence Out of our evil seek to bring forth good, Our labour must be to pervert that end."

Shrimad Bhagavad Gita:

• Gita 18.61–62:⁶

"Ishvarah sarva-bhutanam hrid-deshe Arjuna tishthati..."

(The Lord dwells in the hearts of all beings, directing the wanderings of all.)

"Surrender unto Him alone... by His grace, you will attain supreme peace."

In contrast to Satan's opposition to providence, Vedanta teaches to **trust the divine order**, even in the face of suffering.

Vachanamrut Gadhada I-64:

"Even if a devotee sees apparent evil arising from God, he should trust that it is ultimately for his liberation."

Milton's Satan resists this, choosing defiance instead of faith in the divine plan.

4. The Desire to "Disturb His Inmost Counsels":

This ambition reflects extreme **egoism (ahamkara)** and **dvesha (hatred)**—which are seen as causes of bondage in Vedanta.

Mundaka Upanishad 3.2.9:⁷

"He who knows Brahman becomes Brahman. There is no more delusion."

Satan's entire speech comes from delusion (moha). In Vedantic language, he remains trapped in **samsara**, seeking satisfaction in the perversion of good, rather than liberation from duality.

5. Suffering and Its Transcendence:

Milton's Line: "What reinforcement we may gain from Hope, If not what resolution from despair."

This line shows Satan's refusal to seek **grace** or redemption, contrasting the **Upanishadic vision of liberation through knowledge and devotion**.

Shrimad Bhagavatam 11.7.32 (Uddhava Gita):

"One should tolerate all dualities, knowing them to arise from the mind."⁸

Despair is a result of **misidentification with the body and ego**, which can be transcended by **yoga and bhakti**—the very paths Satan refuses.

6. Self-Realization vs. Self-Will:

Satan's path is one of self-will, not self-realization. In contrast, all major Vedantic scriptures emphasize **egolessness**.

Isha Upanishad 1:

"īśāvāsyam idam sarvam..."⁹

(All this is pervaded by the Lord; nothing belongs to us. Renounce and rejoice.)

Satan clings to possession, control, and pride—opposing the Upanishadic path of renunciation and surrender.

7. Moral Inversion and Karma

Milton's Line: "Out of good still to find means of evil"

Bhagavad Gita 16.7–10:¹⁰

Describes **Asuric** (demonic) nature:

"They say the world is without truth, without a basis, and without a God. It is produced from lust alone."

"Clinging to insatiable desires, full of hypocrisy, pride, and arrogance..."

Satan becomes the very archetype of this **Asuric mindset**, which leads to **naraka (hell)** as described in the Gita.

8. Grace vs. Rebellion

In **Bhakti traditions** like those in **Shrimad Bhagavatam**, **surrender to Bhagavan** is the highest path.

Shrimad Bhagavatam 10.14.8:¹¹

"tat te 'nukampām susamīkṣamāṇo..."

(One who sees even suffering as God's grace, and surrenders, becomes free of samsara.)

Satan, however, sees suffering not as a call to surrender but as a stimulus to revolt—opposite to this teaching.

Conclusion: Comparative Spiritual Vision

Milton's Satan

Asserts: "To be weak is miserable"

Glorifies rebellion, ego, and resistance

Suffers due to attachment and pride

Seeks to pervert divine will

Chooses despair and destruction

Upanishadic/Vedantic Ideal

Declares: "True strength is in Self-realization and humility"

Celebrates surrender (śaraṇāgati) and egolessness (na aham)

Gains bliss through detachment and knowledge

Seeks to harmonize with Brahman's will

Chooses peace and liberation (moksha)

In summary, the extract from *Paradise Lost* powerfully dramatizes the **path of egoism and delusion**, which Vedantic and devotional scriptures universally warn

against. In that sense, the poem aligns not by agreement but by **contrast**, offering a vivid portrait of what the **spiritual seeker must transcend** on the way to enlightenment and God-realization.

6. Historical and Cultural Context

- **Written in 1667**, in the aftermath of the English Civil War and Cromwell's failed Commonwealth, the poem reflects disillusionment with political rebellion.
- **Puritan Influence**: Milton, a Puritan and former supporter of Cromwell, may have projected the tragedy of lost political idealism into Satan's fall.
- **Epic Tradition**: The poem follows Homeric and Virgilian epics but uses the Christian cosmology, shifting the hero from warrior to divine agent.
- **Theological Conflict**: The 17th-century theological debates on predestination and free will inform Satan's rhetoric.

7. Poet's Perspective and Emotional Mindset

- **Milton's blindness** and political disenchantment may have inspired his deep reflections on loss, purpose, and divine justice.
- His sympathy for Satan, or at least his portrayal of Satan as charismatic and articulate, has sparked scholarly debate (notably William Blake's claim: "Milton was of the Devil's party without knowing it").

Emotionally, the passage embodies:

- Frustration with fate,
- A passionate will for autonomy,
- Intellectual ambition and rhetorical power.

8. Target Audience and Purpose

- **Audience**: Christian readers, political thinkers, and theological scholars of his time—and posterity.
- **Purpose**:
 - To explore the consequences of disobedience.
 - To dramatize the cosmic stakes of rebellion and grace.
 - To demonstrate the power of rhetoric in justifying evil—a warning rather than an endorsement.

9. Personal Interpretation

This passage stands as a dramatic paradox: Satan's bold reasoning seduces through logic, yet it also exemplifies the tragic error of resisting divine will. His despair-driven "hope" and twisted moral ambition portray a mind caught in eternal conflict. Personally, this poem evokes awe and caution—it reveals the allure of pride and the devastation it leads to. The intellectual brilliance of Satan's speech masks the deep suffering that comes from isolation, egoism, and disobedience. In that, Milton teaches that true strength lies not in rebellion but in harmonious surrender to a higher order.

Conclusion

Milton's portrayal of Satan in this passage is both awe-inspiring and unsettling—a figure who embodies eloquence, courage, and unyielding will, yet who also

exemplifies the destructive power of ego and alienation from the divine. His claim that "*to be weak is miserable*" reflects a worldview where power and pride are elevated above submission and grace. But in the mirror of **Vedantic and Upanishadic** thought, we find a radically different vision: one in which strength lies not in rebellion, but in realization of the Self, surrender to the divine, and detachment from the fruits of action.

The tension between Satan's tragic resolve and the spiritual wisdom of Indian scriptures reveals a universal human conflict—between the self that asserts and the Self that surrenders, between knowledge born of intellect and wisdom born of union with the eternal. Milton's genius lies in giving voice to this existential rift with poetic brilliance, while spiritual traditions remind us that resolution lies not in defiance but in harmony.

Ultimately, the poem serves as a cautionary exploration of what becomes of the soul that chooses will over wisdom, pride over peace, and ego over eternity. And in that, its message is as timeless as the Vedas and as urgent as our own moral and spiritual journeys.

References

- 1 कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन।
मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि॥ 47॥
- 2 तस्मादसक्तः सततं कार्यं कर्म समाचर।
असक्तो ह्याचरन्कर्म परमाप्नोति पूरुषः॥19॥
- 3 एको देवः सर्वभूतेषु गूढः
सर्वव्यापी सर्वभूतान्तरात्मा।
कर्माध्यक्षः सर्वभूताधिवासः
साक्षी चेता केवलो निर्गुणश्च ॥ ११॥
- 4 कर्मेन्द्रियाणि संयम्य य आस्ते मनसा स्मरन्।
इन्द्रियार्थान्विमूढात्मा मिथ्याचारः स उच्यते॥ 6॥
- 5 नायमात्मा प्रवचनेन लभ्यो न मेधया न बहुना श्रुतेन।
यमेवैष वृणुते तेन लभ्यस्तस्यैष आत्मा विवृणुते तन्नू स्वाम् ॥ २३॥
- 6 ईश्वरः सर्वभूतानां हृद्देशेऽर्जुन तिष्ठति।
भ्रामयन्सर्वभूतानि यन्त्रारूढानि मायया॥ 61॥
- 7 स यो ह वै तत् परमं ब्रह्म वेद ब्रह्मैव भवति नास्याब्रह्मविकुले भवति।
तरति शोकं तरति पाप्मानं गुहाग्रन्थिभ्यो विमुक्तोऽमृतो भवति ॥ ९॥
- 8 श्रीब्राह्मण उवाच
सन्ति मे गुरवो राजन् बहवो बुद्ध्युपाश्रिताः।
यतो बुद्धिमुपादाय मुक्तोऽटामीह तान् शृणु ॥ ३२॥
- 9 ईशावास्यमिदं सर्वं यत्किञ्च जगत्यां जगत्।
तेन त्यक्तेन भुञ्जीथा मा गूधः कस्य स्विद्धनम् ॥ १॥
- 10 प्रवृत्तिं च निवृत्तिं च जना न विदुरासुराः।
न शौचं नापि चाचारो न सत्यं तेषु विद्यते॥ 7॥
- 11 तत्तेऽनुकम्पां सुसमीक्षमाणो
भुञ्जान एवात्मकृतं विपाकम्।
हृद्वाग्वपुर्भिर्विदधन्नमस्ते
जीवेत यो मुक्तिपदे स दायभाक् ॥ ८॥