

If Eve were to sing a ghazal to Adam, she would stop staring at herself first.

What does the relationship between the self and the other look like in the epic? In the epic, where does the self end, and the other begin? How different or how similar is this relationship when the literary form employed is the ghazal? Depending on this relationship, can we infer that in certain forms of literature, the self can be written only in a certain way? These are the questions I'll try to answer in this post, and I'll look at Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Khusro's ghazal *Chhaap Tilak* closely to find out whether they can help us answer the questions I raised. I will also refer back to Bakhtin's essay on the Epic and the Novel to better understand how the world of the epic operates. And through the consideration of these texts and a critical study of their form, I'll try to establish that my main "a-ha" moment is no different from the main "oh-no" moment and that this critical moment was realising that form of literature employed in telling a story changes the self's relationship with the other, and that different forms construct this relationship differently even the story remains the same.

Bakhtin suggests that in the case of the epic, it is complete in the "whole as well as any of its parts" and that the epic hero, unlike the novel hero, should not be "evolving and developing, a person who learns from life." Milton in *Paradise Lost* borrows from the bible the pre-existing characters of Adam, Eve, Satan, etc. and incorporates them into his text, making *Paradise Lost* retain an epic character. When we closely examine Eve, we can ask: does she ever submit to Adam? In Book 4, Eve says to Adam: "Till I espied thee.....winning soft, less amiably mild, / Than that smooth watery image: Back I turned" (Book 4, lines 475-478). Thus, making it clear that not only did she turn back from Adam the moment she saw him for the first time, but she also turned back because he was not as "soft" and "mild" as the watery image, her reflection, which she saw in the water, right after her creation. We find this in Book 4 in the lines "There I had fixed/Mine eyes till now, and pined with vain desire" (Book 4, lines 463-464). And when

Eve turns her back on Adam, his immediate reaction is to follow her, which we find in Book 8. We also find Adam lamenting to God: “Not so is Man, /But in degree; the cause of his desire/By conversation with his like to help/Or solace his defects” (Book 8, 416-419). Adam, thus, through his usage of the words “conversation” and “solace his defects” suggests that one needs a companion who, through partnership, can help manage one’s imperfections. In Eve, then, Adam searches not for a subject, but rather an equal. Thus, we learn two important things here: Eve thinks she is self-sufficient, that she herself is more desirable to her, and that she turns her back to Adam, making him cry out in desperation. Adam’s regard for Eve is not that of subjugation; rather, Adam seeks companionship from Eve.

But why did Milton characterise Eve as a self-indulgent individual? I contend that because it is an epic poem that Milton wrote, the form of the epic influenced Milton’s characterisation of Eve. When Bakhtin talks about the national tradition that makes itself apparent in the epic, he mentions that this national tradition refers back to a certain absolute past, which then becomes the foundation of the contemporary nation. So, how is Eve from the epic related to this absolute past? Mishti commented that “Eve was created with the purpose of revolution” when positing Eve as the main culprit behind the fall in *Paradise Lost*. This prompts me to think of her as an epic hero, whose actions, back in the day, began a chain reaction resulting in the ejection and eventual exile of mankind from Eden onto Earth. It is Eve, whose actions give the contemporary readers of *Paradise Lost* an epic past to refer back to, and give the text its epic, heightened character. Because the form of the text is epic, whether in *Genesis* or in *Paradise Lost*, it bleeds into the character of Eve: Eve is the epic hero, of course, and Eve puts herself above Adam! The epic form is not accommodating of a selfhood that is not obsessed with fortifying or strongly establishing itself: Eve chooses not to look at anything that is not herself

the moment she is created. Her vision is directed to her own form and any other form that deviates from her only slightly (i.e., Adam), she rejects.

The self, then, in the epic is of paramount importance; not only is it complete and unchanging, but it is also separate from the rest of the world, which the self treats as something separate and disconnected and as having a lower status than itself. Intoxicated with the ontological superiority of the self, it makes the rest of existence into an 'other' which is not important and can thus fade away into the background: "yet methought less fair..... Back I turned", there seems to be no other consideration that fills up the space between the conceiving of the other and then immediately proceeding to reject it. This is the relationship between the self and the other in the world of the epic: the other precedes the birth of the self. Then the self awakens and grows obsessed with itself, its obsession with itself eclipsing the existence of all that precedes and is external to it, i.e., it takes note of the other much later than it takes note of itself. Hoisting itself above all else, the self then rejects the other immediately upon knowing of its existence as something which precedes and is separate from the self. Just as the epic is spatially exalted over the contemporary consumer, the self (Eve in the case of *Paradise Lost*) in the epic is not only starkly distinct from the rest of the epic, but also placed higher internally in the epic, with respect to other characters, etc.

Now we think about how this relationship between the self and the other changes drastically in the case of the ghazal. In Khusro's *Chhaap Tilak*, we find an "I" and another "You". The text revolves around depicting what happens when the eyes of the "I" meet with the eyes of the "you". It is the other in the case of the ghazal, who is agential in causing things to the self, and this is seen in the line "you coloured me (like) yourself, /when our eyes met". The self of the ghazal appears to be on the receiving end. In the ghazal, the self describes happenings as a

subject of a situation, and not as someone who has brought out certain changes in a certain situation. What is more interesting about this verse is that the self is being made into the image of the other, by the other, making the self appear the same “colour” as the other. According to Raghav: “The phrase “you coloured me like yourself” shows how desire alters the “I,” much like cloth that, once dyed, changes colour.....reveals how desire erases the “I” as, the lover prepares to present himself, only to “forget himself” upon encounter.” Thus, this is a spontaneous transformation that fundamentally uproots the self and can be brought about by something as mild as eyes meeting, such is the visceral effect of the other on the self. Next, Khusro, the “I” claims that “You made me drink love’s elixir/and I got drunk”. To think of love as a drink that causes a person to be drunk is interesting: a person, when drunk, loses control, can’t stand on their own feet, can’t walk in a straight line, etc. So, the self, being drunk with love, must be an unstable entity, one with a loosened grounding, who keeps swaying. Thus, the self of the ghazal is a self that is not fixed in one place: its grounding has loosened, and this allows it to be an evolving entity, which allows it to be affected irreversibly by external factors. The self of the ghazal also looks outwards rather than towards itself. The other is everything for the self of the ghazal, and the entirety of the ghazal is employed in describing either the other or the effect that the other has on the self. This is radically different from the self of the epic, which is interested only in looking at itself: Eve falls in love while looking at herself and refuses companionship to Adam.

The self of the ghazal, though, is not only a fundamentally evolving entity, but it also lets the other be in absolute control and allows the other to be the agent of the transformation the self goes through. In the epic, the self is an epic hero who resides above all the other elements of the epic internally and is the principal agent, also exalted over the contemporary consumer. In the ghazal, the self is the “I”, and except for one, all stanzas of Chhaap Tilak operates in the

register of the “I” and the “you”, as if luring the reader to occupy any of these two positions, thus suggesting the reader to enter the operating arena of the ghazal, something which the epic never allows according to Bakhtin; in the epic the consumer cannot enter as the distance between the epic and its reader is filled with national tradition. The self of the ghazal is also not entirely traceable, much unlike the epic hero, who is structured beyond ambiguity. As a result, the self of the ghazal is sometimes drunk, other times it is a married woman, if the reader wants so, the reader is the self sometimes (the recurring usage of “I” seems to lure the reader into considering the ghazal their own voice) and whatnot.

This is the effect the form of literature has on its contents: while the epic form gives self-exaltation and grandeur (and treats the other rather neglectfully), it makes the content suffocatingly structured. The ghazal, on the other hand, allows for the content to be mischievous and deviant: it refuses any adherence to a structure and sometimes deliberately leaves blank spaces, daring the reader to fill them, and in the process reveal something about their identity. My main “a-ha” moment is the same as the main “oh-no” moment. And this moment is me realising that regardless of how the characters of stories in my mind are like, depending on the form I decide to tell my story in, their selfhoods will change: how my characters construct their sense of self in relation to what is other to them will change. Now, this to me means that there are only certain forms which could be suitable for certain stories to be told in: Eve can be self-indulgent only when I decide to write an epic about her. This narrows down many possibilities: all combinations of form and content are simply not possible. However, more interestingly, this would mean that, depending on the form I employ, the characters of the story I have in my head will reveal certain critical aspects of themselves. Mixing and matching different forms of literature with different stories and their characters will reveal the different ways in which the characters conceptualise their selfhood in

relationship with their respective others, and that this will change with each different form employed. If I am to write a ghazal in Eve's voice instead of an epic, expressing her love to Adam, it will be impossible for her to sound self-indulgent; thus, unlike as it is in *Paradise Lost*, she will not "turn back" from Adam, thus changing an important plot detail. As a result, what can narrow down possibilities can also be potent in opening up certain other possibilities. This is why the main "a-ha" moment is no different from the main "oh-no" moment for me.