

**Milton and the Modern Muslimah:**  
***Paradise Lost* and British-Asian Muslim Women Readers**

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## Abstract

This thesis examines how John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) is read and understood today. It primarily gives voice to the reading experiences of British South-Asian Muslim women of Bangladeshi, Indian, and Pakistani descent. Comparing this group with non-Muslim readers, the study proceeds on the assumption that the individual backgrounds of readers colour their interpretations of the poem. The thesis uses mixed qualitative research methods of questionnaires and interviews to investigate this claim. A novel exploration of 'readerprints' is developed to describe the way in which a reader's interpretative response is influenced by facets of their intersectional identity. The study finds that as well as the backgrounds of readers informing their viewpoints, other factors such as the personality of participants and the social dynamics of their learning environments also heavily influence their readings. The moment of interaction between researcher and respondent during data collection is revealed to be another contributing factor.

The investigation begins with 'Part 1: Methods' which details crucial critical background and explains the construction of the study. 'Part 2: Reader Responses to *Paradise Lost*' follows thereafter and considers reader-responses towards five key figures: God the Father, God the Son, Satan, Adam, and Eve. Each segment begins with a consideration of the reception history of each literary figure and then moves on to examine the responses of participants in this modern-day study. 'Part 3: Teaching *Paradise Lost* in UK Higher Education' explores the wider context of a reader's experience of the text, showing how an individual's educational environment has a powerful impact on their encounter with a literary text. This section reflects on tutors' pedagogical practices in a rapidly changing socio-political climate, and their approach to working with students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds (BAME) in their institutions.

For Amma and Abu  
আম্মা এবং আব্বুর জন্য।

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## **Prefatory Note on Scholarly Conventions**

The term ‘Muslimah’ is used throughout the thesis to refer to a Muslim woman.

Qur’anic references are quoted from an English translation: *The Qur'an*, trans. by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Chapter and verse numbers are provided in parenthesis in the main body of the text.

Footnotes conform to the third edition of the MHRA style guide. Texts are cited in full in the first instance and in abbreviated form subsequently.

Quotations from a primary source (i.e., a participant in the study) are contained within double quotation marks. Secondary sources (i.e., a critic or commentator) are contained within single quotation marks. The rationale for using double and single quotation marks in this way is to make it easier for the reader to understand at a glance the kind of source being quoted.

## Introduction

What is a book without a reader, a song without a listener, a movie without a viewer? These various art forms – the book, song, and movie – are lifeless and become obsolete without their counterparts. This is certainly the case when considering canonical works such as John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) which in its retelling of the Genesis narrative is renowned for sparking great debate, intrigue, and introspection in its readers. Without the recorded impressions of readers, the poetic work would not be elevated to what it is today. Scholars have recognised the value in examining responses to the poem and have long contributed to the readership and reception history of the epic. However, while this has been illuminating, reception studies have neglected to address the responses of minority groups of readers such as British South-Asian Muslim women. Milton's poem speaks particularly profoundly to Muslim readers, dramatizing as it does a Christian origin story that is also central to Islamic belief, though, of course, *Paradise Lost* deviates from the Qur'anic account. This thesis gives voice to this minority group of readers and uncovers how the intersectional identities of individual Muslimah readers may have coloured or informed their unique reading experiences. In doing so, it furthers knowledge on different types of readers and their reading processes; and establishes how our understanding of *Paradise Lost* is enriched through an appreciation of diverse voices and perspectives. To this end, this study explores the sociological implications of the way in which British South-Asian Muslim women read the epic and examines the educational contexts of modern-day readers in multi-cultural Britain.

Although Milton's epic has enjoyed a revered literary status since at least the eighteenth century, disillusionment with the English literary canon has meant that its cultural position and value has often been questioned. Harold Bloom famously argues that despite increasing resistance to the poem and controversy about its cultural status, Milton's place in

the canon is essential and permanent.<sup>1</sup> However, others are not so convinced and hold the view that the Western canon is exclusionary, deeply entrenched in power and privilege, and is a product of patriarchy and colonialism.<sup>2</sup> As a woman of colour, I admit to initially struggling with feelings of discomfort when reflecting on these arguments and feared that in choosing to examine a canonical English literary work, I was somehow complicit in contributing to an inequitable cultural status quo. To promote inclusivity in literature, however, I understood that the study of canonical works needed reform and transformative attention if they wished to stay in tune with students in our ever-changing world. This thesis exemplifies how this can be achieved with *Paradise Lost*. It stages a conversation about how Milton's epic can be a powerful tool and a useful gateway for modern readers as we explore our own selves and those around us. As a result, this study reveals how a different type of engagement with the poem can spark fresh interest in it and accommodate a new generation of readers, and more yet to come.

My rationale for choosing *Paradise Lost* as a case study was primarily due to it mapping onto the Genesis narrative which made it a useful mythological framework that readers from different faiths and backgrounds could recognise and comment on. More personally, this investigation was inspired by my own exposure to the poem in final year of undergraduate study at the University of Birmingham. Over one semester, seminars on the epic were taught by a male tutor to a class of ethnically and spiritually diverse group of British women. During these early morning sessions, sleep was forgotten as the room bustled

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (London: Papermac, 1994), p. 169.

<sup>2</sup> A range of works explore this in greater depth, including: Peter Shaw, 'The Assault on the Canon', *The Sewanee Review*, 102.2, (1994), 257-270; Jessica Muns, 'Canon Fodder: Women's Studies and the (British) Literary Canon', in *Canon vs Culture*, ed. by Jan Gorak (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2001), p. 3-15; Lillian S. Robinson, 'Treason Our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 2.1, (1983), 83-98; Barbara Herrnstein Smith, 'Contingencies of Value', in *Canons*, ed. by Robert von Hallberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 34-35; Rob Pope, *The English Studies Book: An Introduction to Language, Literature and Culture*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 188; Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge, 1978); Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994); Donald Wesling, 'Constructivist Theory and the Literary Canon', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, 3.1, (1997), 139-148.

with fascinated takes on where the metaphysical journey across heaven, hell, and the garden of Eden had taken us. Conversations ignited by the poem's various moral conundrums and gender relations were captivating and our sessions usually ran over the allotted time. Reflecting as a practicing Muslimah, I quickly realised the poem's remarkable power to unite and divide us in varying ways.<sup>3</sup> I was struck with an appreciation for how the individual identities of each reader framed interpretations, fuelled discussions, and enriched understandings. To explain such a phenomenon, I coined the term 'readerprint' to refer to the way in which a reader's interpretative response is influenced by facets of their intersectional identity (including gender, age, familial background, sex, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion, disability, to name a few). Crucially, no two readerprints are identical, and individuals may not be aware of these influences themselves. Dynamism in the act of reading means that readerprints are fluid and can change or evolve over time. Where this is identifiable in responses, I comment on these instances. Tracing the movement of a readerprint is important, allowing insight into varying states of interpretation and reflection on why such adjustments may have occurred. Taking this into account, this study investigates how *Paradise Lost* is read and understood today. It operates in the hope of uncovering how we shape texts, and how they shape us.

The idea of readerprints adds to existing critical concepts that explore how identities operate and shape experiences in unique ways. My approach encourages a nuanced understanding of how different identities intersect and interact when readers encounter a literary work. In another case, Diana Fuss recognises the importance of intersectionality as she uses psychoanalytic theory to examine texts and challenges the idea of a unified and

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<sup>3</sup> 'Muslimah' is a term used to refer to a Muslim woman. See 'Muslimah', in *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online], <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/256957>> [accessed 10 February 2023].

singular identity.<sup>4</sup> José Esteban Muñoz's 'disidentification' theory goes further, suggesting that a 'survival strategy' is used by marginalised individuals to subvert and reinterpret dominant cultural norms and representations. He focusses on the experiences of queer people of colour and states that disidentification is a way for minoritized individuals to negotiate their identities in a world that does not fully acknowledge their existence.<sup>5</sup> When considering responses to literary works, uncovering readerprints is a beneficial tool that reveals how individuals from all backgrounds navigate their identities, emotions, and environments to generate meaning and create agency in their readings. As this study reveals, my framework allows an appreciation of readers from minority backgrounds and helps to project their voices into wider spaces. The readerprint theory differs from Muñoz's model as it does not necessarily suggest that non-traditional readers will subvert meaning, rather, it proposes that readers will find ways for their interpretations to co-exist with the text. Rita Felski criticises existing literary approaches that do not factor in personal and emotional responses and recommends 'postcritical reading' as an alternative method. Her approach attempts to understand how a text might resonate with readers on different levels:

Rather than looking behind the text— for its hidden causes, determining conditions, and noxious motives— we might place ourselves in front of the text, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible.<sup>6</sup>

Felski argues that the postcritical approach allows readers to recognise the value of engaging with a text in a way that connects with their experiences and emotions. My theory of

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<sup>4</sup> Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 1-21, Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1990). See 'Part 1: Methods' for a detailed exploration of intersectionality.

<sup>5</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, ed. by George Yudice, Jean Franco, and Juan Flores (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 25-31.

<sup>6</sup> Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 12.

readerprints recognises the experiences and emotions of readers, but also their intersectional identities which work together with the text to produce fascinating insights. These subtleties are often delicate, and the threads of connection can remain unconscious to the reader.<sup>7</sup>

In recent years, early modern studies have been galvanised by an interest in the responses of international and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) readers, audiences, and performers of canonical literary works.<sup>8</sup> Yet, while such studies have helped enormously to redraw the map of contemporary literary engagements in the light of issues such as multilingualism, translation, interculturalism, post-colonialism, and race, very few have taken account of the intersection of these considerations with religion and gender politics. This is despite the fact that, in the UK at least, there is a growing Muslim population<sup>9</sup> and female BAME students of English literature in higher education far outnumber their male counterparts.<sup>10</sup> My project attempts to redress the balance by focusing on the encounter of British South-Asian Muslim women of Bangladeshi, Indian, and Pakistani descent with Milton's Christian epic. This non-traditional group of readers of canonical English literature share theological connections with the poem that mean that certain characters including God the Father, God the Son, Satan, Adam, and Eve resonate powerfully with them and overlap

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<sup>7</sup> The methodological process and reflexivity of the researcher are therefore integral to the approach. The questions asked must be a combination of predetermined and extempore thematic questions. This methodology is a discursive and exploratory means of uncovering the unconscious readerprint. For more information on methodology, see chapter on 'Research Methods'.

<sup>8</sup> Ambereen Dadabhoy and Nedda Mehdizadeh, *Anti-Racist Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023); BBA Shakespeare: 'British Black and Asian Shakespeare', (2018)

<<https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/research/currentprojects/multiculturalshakespeare/>> [accessed 17 September 2020]; Duran, Angelica, et al. (2017), eds., *Milton in Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

<sup>9</sup> The proportion of the overall population who identified as 'Muslim' in England and Wales increased from 4.9% (2.7 million) in 2011 to 6.5% (3.9 million) in 2021. People who described themselves as 'Muslim' had the youngest average, followed by those who reported 'no religion'. Office for National Statistics, *Religion by age and sex, England and Wales: Census 2021* (2023)

<<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/articles/religionbyageandsexenglandandwales/census2021>> [accessed 7 March 2023].

<sup>10</sup> HESA: Higher Education Statistics Agency, *Table 46 - HE student enrolments by subject of study 2019/20 to 2021/22* (January 2023) <<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-46>> [accessed 7 February 2023], HESA: Higher Education Statistics Agency, *Table 45 - UK domiciled HE student enrolments by subject of study and ethnicity* (January 2023) <<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-45>> [accessed 7 February 2023].

with the catalogue of topics most often debated in the reception history of *Paradise Lost*.<sup>11</sup> By devoting a chapter each to readers' responses to these figures, this thesis advances knowledge and understanding in three ways. First, and most obviously, it contributes to the interpretative history of Milton's poem by considering the responses of minority ethnic female readers, adding a further dimension to important recent work on Milton's international readers.<sup>12</sup> Crucially, however, British South-Asian Muslim women are not treated as a monolithic or undifferentiated group; on the contrary, the most fascinating insights in the project derive from an appreciation of the ways in which the attitudes and expectations of Muslimah readers may be shaped as much by personality, culture, and custom as by religious doctrine. Second, my study considers how the encounter with *Paradise Lost* in an educational setting informs the Muslimahs' negotiation of identity. How do the kind of questions concerning religion, politics, gender, and morality raised by *Paradise Lost*, a text which may be seen as dangerously heterodox yet at the same time reassuringly fictional, play into the complex challenges faced by the modern British Muslimah in both reclaiming and reshaping socio-cultural norms and narratives? Third, my study proceeds on the assumption that Muslim women's encounters with *Paradise Lost* do not occur in cultural isolation. Rather, the responses to the text of individual female Muslim readers take place in the context of seminar and social conversations with other students and readers of quite different backgrounds and faiths. This project, then, shows how a reader's response to literature is affected not only by the cultural and religious habits of thought brought to the text, but also by the social and cultural interaction within which the study of that text takes place.

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<sup>11</sup> John Leonard, *Faithful Labourers: A Reception History of 'Paradise Lost', 1667-1970: Volume I: Style and Genre; Volume II: Interpretive Issues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Islam Issa, *Milton in the Arab Muslim World* (New York: Routledge, 2017); *Milton in Translation*, ed. by Angelica Duran (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Discussions with academics have revealed varying attitudes towards this type of investigation. For instance, when I surveyed higher educational institutions across the UK, one Oxbridge academic remarked that he considered the study ‘odd’ as he had never encountered any Muslim students and could not understand how a reader’s background or identity might inform their interpretations of the poem in any way. This sharply contrasted with discussions I had with numerous academics in the UK and abroad, who welcomed these lines of enquiry and were enthused when hearing the preliminary findings of the study. As well as reflections on reading *Paradise Lost*, stories of how they and their students made intersectional connections with other texts were shared.<sup>13</sup> These differing attitudes reveal two distinct approaches in the spectrum of reading and studying literary works. One approach plays down the significance of a reader’s intellectual and cultural formation, and instead emphasises that reader’s training and ability to read the text on its own terms. It stresses the importance of understanding the text in its historical, cultural moment of production and first reception. The other approach, which is followed in my line of enquiry, is to allow and embrace the idea that each reader brings something different to the text, and those differences can result in a variety of responses and interpretations of the poem. This thesis does not suggest that there is a correct way of understanding literature, but rather, seeks to honour readers and their varying processes of interpretation, whatever they may be. In effect, it raises an important question about the social dynamics of reading, and how these different attitudes can affect the way students respond to expectations about how they should approach literary works.

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<sup>13</sup> In conversations, academics shared that their students connected certain literary works with their personal backgrounds, which frequently produced positive seminar engagement and strong responses to essay questions. Examples of these works ranged from Christopher Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta*, William Shakespeare’s *Othello* and *King Lear*, James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, George Herbert’s *Prayer (1)*, J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, and Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*.



The importance of recognising and valuing different types of readers was apparent when conversing with a network of Muslim women in academia.<sup>14</sup> They welcomed this study's aim to uncover readerprints and recognised it as a way minority readers could better connect and reconcile with literary material. While sharing their own experiences of studying English literature in higher education, several of these professional Muslim women revealed that they often felt like 'outsiders' when studying the canon, as opposed to their peers who 'felt ownership' of the texts being studied. Ultimately, this led some to leave the discipline entirely or drift away from canonical English literary works and venture into alternative areas including comparative literature, post-colonialism, and Arabic literature. For example, one member of the network turned to analysing the representation of Muslim anti-colonial movements in British fiction, whilst another wished to feel ownership and remain within her field and settled on researching Anglophone Arab literature instead. In essence, these exchanges reveal that reading canonical works was not always a positive experience for these women and reflect the urgent need to review practices if this is to be improved. Clearly, a lack of belonging leads to an eventual disconnect for non-traditional and minority groups, which has a later consequence of inspiring fewer BAME individuals to continue in the field of early modern literature, or in the discipline more broadly. Hoping to disrupt this pattern, this study aims to reconnect readers and serve as an example of the potentialities of English literature in bridging and diagnosing cultural difference.

While conducting a study of this nature, it was important to reflect on my own positionality as researcher. Though I did experience some resistance from institutions which made me question whether my identity affected access, for the most part I found that my background as a British-Bangladeshi Muslim woman aided the research process. As I

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<sup>14</sup> NeSa (Network of Sisters in Academia) is an international professional platform for Muslim women in academia. This space is dedicated to connecting and supporting Muslimahs in their respective research fields. For more information on this platform, see: Network of Sisters in Academia (NeSA), *About* (2022) <<https://www.nesaonline.com/about>> [accessed 11 February 2023].

intended to amplify the voices of marginal British South-Asian Muslimah readers, I found that sharing various intersectional traits (such as religion, gender, and aspects of culture) with my target group allowed me to easily establish rapport and build trust, which in turn, encouraged them to share their experiences a lot more freely. My background was also helpful on an interpretative level as my knowledge and lived experience as a British South-Asian Muslim woman made me aware of certain social, cultural, and religious references that participants referred to. Despite this, I was aware that my own presence could also negatively impact the investigation. To avoid this and attain the best results, I employed ‘reflexivity’ at every possible stage. Hennick et al. explains the process of reflexivity as an explicit awareness of a researcher’s values, self-identity or ideologies, which is important to bring forth a greater sense of self-awareness within qualitative research.<sup>15</sup> Regardless of my similarities and/or differences with the respondents in this study, I was mindful not to project my own views and compromise my study’s findings. I approached this investigation with an open mind and a sincere intention to contribute productively to the discussion on how marginal voices can be better understood and appreciated in Milton studies.

This reception-study is divided into three key sections. First, in ‘Part 1: Methods’, the literature review explains where this reception study is situated in relation to five key areas in critical studies: Milton’s reception; reader-response theories and practices; experiences of British South-Asian Muslim women in UK higher education; intersectional theories; and decolonising the curriculum. Through this approach, I discuss key publications and theories that have shaped existing knowledge and show where there are opportunities for further studies at the intersections. In doing so, I address the ways this investigation enhances the conversation on how Milton is read and understood today. A chapter on research

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<sup>15</sup> Monique Hennick, Inge Hutter and Ajay Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods* (London: Sage Publications, 2011), p. 20. I share more detail on how I conducted this research in Part 1: Methods.

methodology follows thereafter which outlines the overall research approach; participants in the study; particularities of the chosen research methods; methods of data analysis (such as coding and transcription); ethical considerations; and limitations of the study. Together, the literature review and methodology explain the crucial critical background and construction of this study before moving onto Parts 2 and 3 which reveal the findings of this investigation.

‘Part 2: Reader Responses to *Paradise Lost*’ comprises five dedicated chapters on the characters of 1) God the Father, 2) God the Son, 3) Satan, 4) Adam, and 5) Eve. Each chapter begins with a consideration of the reception history of each literary figure and then moves onto examining the responses of participants in this modern-day study. This project’s novel approach lies not only in focussing on the responses of a particular sub-group of readers, but also in distinguishing between the responses of individual readers within that sub-group and what the project takes to be their personality ‘types’ (which I categorise as ‘objectivist’, ‘cultural accommodator’, ‘contrarian’, and ‘conformist’). These personality types map in interesting, though not always predictable, ways of reading the poem, ranging from respondents who claim to disregard their background while reading, to those whose interpretations of *Paradise Lost* are heavily and continually informed by their religious and cultural formation.

God the Father’s chapter offers a flexible approach to understanding modern day responses and argues that a reader brings both their identity *and* their critical faculties to bear when reading. The chapter illuminates how Milton’s characterisation of God the Father prompts varying responses in readers in accordance with their social, cultural, and religious backgrounds; and explores how these interpretations are reconciled with their thoughts on Milton’s God and the poem as a whole. It reveals that God the Father is heavily critiqued by non-Muslim participants who detect distance, detachment, and dullness in the figure; while for Muslimah respondents, Milton’s God is compared with understandings of God in the

Islamic tradition, which results in a quieter discomfort, a lighter critique, and attempts to rationalise his behaviour.

Next, God the Son's chapter unveils how the absence of God the Son in the Islamic tradition often leads Muslimahs to adapt their interpretations in light of their religious beliefs which results in acceptance of the character, or a rejection of the Son on the basis of irrelevance, discomfort, and a lack of interest. It also pays close attention to how non-Muslim readers either feel drawn to the Son's kindness and heroism; are critical of his arrogance and lack of autonomy; or are repelled by his complicity in the Fall of humankind.

Satan's chapter demonstrates interesting complexities when we take into account assumptions about group identity and religious/non-religious allegiances and affiliations. By uncovering readerprints, it discloses how across all sample groups, the fallen-angel is approached in a dualistic way – as a figure who represents something bad and evil, but also a figure who participants identify with and relate to. By exploring how readers navigate through narratives of difference and feelings of discomfort towards Satan, this chapter examines how the character unifies some readers through markers of relatability and leads others to experience anxieties in their own understandings of faith.

Analysis of Adam's portrayal reveals how faith is a force that often shapes how readers interpret his character. This chapter explores how the Muslimah respondents tend to look at the character of Adam in a softer and compassionate light which is reflective of prophet Adam's characterisation in the Islamic tradition. It explains that when Muslimahs were dissatisfied with Milton's portrayal, this was because readers felt Milton's adaptation fell short to their religious understandings of the first man. Contrastingly, this chapter reveals the reader responses of non-Muslim readers who had a stronger tendency to dislike Adam and were disturbed by the portrayal of him in the poem. Moreover, it uncovers varying degrees of contextual and self-awareness in respondents as it investigates how empathy operates in the

instances that readers do connect with him; and examines how fury and frustration cause his dismissal for others.

Lastly, Eve's chapter shows that there are shared trends of topics discussed across all sample groups. It discloses how there is a striking sense of unity among Muslimahs who heavily criticise Milton's portrayal of Eve as they perceive it to be an inaccurate representation of the first woman presented in the Qu'ranic tradition. The chapter reveals how Muslimahs' subtle attempts to dismantle negative and sexist stereotypes reflect their efforts to reshape socio-cultural norms of the time in which we live. Comparatively, it explores how non-Muslim respondents are often more comfortable and sympathetic with the depiction and demonstrates how intellectual and emotional engagement with the poem is profoundly coloured by the social, cultural, and religious formations of Milton's modern-day readers.

Finally, in 'Part 3: Teaching *Paradise Lost* in UK Higher Education', I draw a fuller picture of the educational contexts of modern-day readers and show how an individual's educational environment has a powerful impact on how they encounter literary works. I demonstrate this by drawing upon twelve semi-structured interviews conducted with tutors who teach Milton at nine different UK higher education institutions. I reflect on their varying pedagogical practices, their reactions to the UK's rapidly changing socio-political climate (such as the impact of Black Lives Matter Movement and the COVID-19 pandemic), and their approach to working with students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds (BAME) in their institutions. This investigation finds that study of Milton in higher education is slowly declining and stresses that in order to continue to teach *Paradise Lost* in a decolonised world, inclusivity in classrooms must be actively practiced. It showcases the benefits of inter-faith and cross-cultural dialogue and illustrates how this increases engagement with the epic and helps to facilitate conversation.



## **Part 1: Methods**

## **Literature Review**

As explained in the introduction, this thesis is the first of its kind to consider the reading experiences of British-South Asian Muslim women in relation to *Paradise Lost*. It is also unique in investigating the pedagogical practices of tutors of early modern English Literature across higher educational institutions in multicultural Britain with special consideration of students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds, and a rapidly changing socio-political climate. The purpose of this literature review is to illustrate where my study is situated in relation to five key areas: Milton's reception; reader-response theories and practices; experiences of British South-Asian Muslim women in UK higher education; intersectional theories; and decolonising the curriculum. Within these areas, I will discuss key publications and theories that have shaped existing knowledge and show where there are opportunities for further studies at the intersections. Through reviewing the existing critical literature in these five areas of study, I aim to show the ways in which my own investigation contributes to scholarly and public conversation about how Milton is read and understood today.

### **Milton's Reception**

Research material concerning Milton's reception includes *Faithful Labourers* by John Leonard in 2013, which is a hugely influential reception history of *Paradise Lost*, covering the years 1667-1970. In volume one, Leonard attends to questions of style and genre, whilst in volume two, his account sifts the historical evidence to uncover six enduring interpretative issues ('Satan', 'God', 'Innocence', 'The Fall', 'Sex and the Sexes', 'The Universe') around which critical debate has traditionally coalesced. These six issues certainly inform my own thinking about the themes most important for my Muslimah readers, but they do not define them. Structurally in this reception study, I designate individual chapters for the characters of



God the Father, God the Son, Satan, Adam, and Eve, and within them, discuss related issues that resonate most strongly in the contemporary cultural and social worlds of my target readers. Despite initially opting to categorise this thesis in accordance with thematic patterns, this alternate character format proved to be more conducive to mapping the intersections and differences between Muslimah and non-Muslim respondents. It also quickly became clear that the common denominator for all participants was the discussion of character, and not overarching themes, which allowed for a clearer framework for the thesis.

Leonard's work has been useful to consult when it comes to understanding the critical reception history of *Paradise Lost*. However, it also brings to light the danger of universalism in Milton studies. Filza Waseem explains that in literary criticism, the theme of universality works on the assumption that all cultural and social differences can be ignored by highlighting universal features of humanity, which are describable and reducible. She contends that it amounts to 'constructing' an 'other' which is far removed from the actual individual human being. In the context of globalisation, Waseem warns that trying to fit the yardstick of Western universalism to students at the periphery can bring about their assimilation, marginalisation and denigration.<sup>1</sup> In the same vein, Bill Ashcroft et al. understand universality as a 'notion of a unitary and homogeneous human nature which marginalises and excludes the distinctive characteristics, the difference, of post-colonial societies'.<sup>2</sup> These critics argue that the washing out of cultural difference has become a prominent effect of European literary criticism, since some appeal to the essential humanity of readers has been constructed as a function of the value and significance of the literary work.<sup>3</sup> Traditional scholarship such as Leonard's reception history tend, whether consciously

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<sup>1</sup> Filza Waseem, 'The Theme of Universality in the English Literary Text and Criticism', *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 3.20, (2013), 261-269 (268).

<sup>2</sup> Bill Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2003), p. 55.

<sup>3</sup> Ashcroft, p. 55.

or otherwise, to elevate such Western models which claim universal validity rather than acknowledging the contextual boundedness of readers. Given that Leonard's focus is on the persistence of certain critical concerns over three centuries, he tends to assume an implied or generic reader,<sup>4</sup> and his work thus typifies Anglo-American responses to Milton's poem. However, even as far back as the 1970s, theorists of hermeneutics and reception theory recognised the limitations of such an approach and were careful to distinguish between 'implied' and 'actual' readers.<sup>5</sup> This is further stressed by Islam Issa, who explains that because reader-response criticism typically focuses on 'American and European' critical modes, it overlooks other seemingly peripheral groups despite their distinctiveness and importance. Issa calls this 'periphery neglect' and explains that early modern studies thus suffers from a type of identity negligence, in which emphasis is placed primarily on mainstream readers despite their non-universality.<sup>6</sup>

In recent years, international efforts have been made to combat this negligence and recognise the far-reaching global impact of Milton's works. This includes the 2017 publication of *Milton in Translation* which features extensive analysis of twenty-three different translations of Milton's works, containing diverse insights and careful consideration on varied reader receptions across the world from the seventeenth century through to today.<sup>7</sup> These translations have made Milton available and comprehensible to a wider, global audience where these readers are far removed from Milton's original language and context.

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<sup>4</sup> 'Many readers have thought that Milton's God has 'an evil side (...)' John Leonard, *Faithful Labourers: A Reception History of 'Paradise Lost', 1667-1970: Volume II: Interpretive Issues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 496.

<sup>5</sup> Theorists carefully distinguish between actual, and implied readers. An 'actual reader' is described as an individual subject in the act of reading a particular text. While an 'implied reader' denotes a hypothetical reader towards whom a text is directed: the implied reader has certain expectations and employs certain reading strategies in order to get the most out of a particular text. See: Andrew Bennett, *Readers and Reading* (New York: Longman, 1995); Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); Hans Robert Jauss, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. by Timothy Bahti (Brighton: Harvester, 1982).

<sup>6</sup> Islam Issa, *Milton in the Arab Muslim World* (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> *Milton in Translation*, ed. by Angelica Duran (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 4-6.

This thesis focuses on improving knowledge of students encountering Milton in his original language and to some extent, his context. It therefore assesses the interpretative act in the locus of the reader rather than the translator. By giving voice to minority and non-traditional Muslimah readers who understand the poem in its original English form, this study will highlight the richness of Milton's appeal by demonstrating that one does not always have to look too far to understand the global impact of *Paradise Lost*.

Islam Issa's *Milton in the Arab Muslim World* is an illuminating work which recognises the importance of noting the reading experiences of non-mainstream readers, particularly Muslims, who have otherwise been overlooked. Given that the story of *Paradise Lost* also exists in Islamic tradition, Issa states that the interpretive benefits of filling the obvious critical gap in Milton studies can be equally, if not more, informative.<sup>8</sup> My study, therefore, following the footsteps of Issa's account of Egyptian Sunni Muslim readers of *Paradise Lost* in Arabic translation, establishes a representative target group of 'actual' readers (British Asian Muslimahs of Pakistani, Indian, and Bangladeshi descent) that recognises and honours the particularity of individual responses while also attempting to establish and investigate areas of shared concern and interest across the target group. Though both my study and Issa's look at Muslim readers, it is important to note the national and educational contextual differences between Issa's study in Egypt and my own. Muslims reading Milton in a predominantly Muslim country is a different situation than Muslimahs reading Milton in multicultural Britain where they are a minority. As well as the differing ethnicities of both groups, the varying social, cultural, and political environments of these actual readers are also distinctly dissimilar as are traditions of educational and pedagogic practice. Moreover, unlike Issa's work which does not place an emphasis on the gender of participants, my own research carefully does so, paying close attention to intersectional

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<sup>8</sup> Issa, p. 7.

factors related to gender politics. In addition to sampling men in the study, I use non-Muslim respondents as points of comparison, thus allowing for a fruitful discussion of how precisely the individual identities of readers shape and colour their understandings of Milton's religious epic. This comparative layer will aid in examining the Muslim respondents' views in interesting ways, shedding light on how faith (and the absence of it) more generally is at work. As well as drawing out differences, it will also help to identify shared trends, patterns, and overlaps between readers from different groups.

Existing studies of Milton's female readers are few but are gradually increasing. Among them, Joseph Wittreich's *Feminist Milton* focuses on the author's early female readers (before 1830) and concludes that women in the period found in *Paradise Lost*, and especially in Milton's depiction of Eve, a progressive, liberal Milton who expressed patriarchal attitudes only to expose and defeat them.<sup>9</sup> This theory has proven to be controversial with critics including Vance Hampleman, who concludes that women's reactions to *Paradise Lost* do not fall neatly into any set pattern, least of all the uniform feminist response that Wittreich perceives.<sup>10</sup> Covering Milton's female readership from 1667 to 1980, Hampleman draws the general conclusion that individual interpretations of the poem are coloured by personal beliefs and ideologies.<sup>11</sup> While this is perhaps predictable, it reinforces the importance of distinguishing between the different types of readers that exist in our contemporary moment, and stresses the need to pay close attention to more non-traditional groups without assuming universality in interpretations. To accomplish this, my thesis' comparative model examines the viewpoints of British South-Asian Muslim women in relation to each other, and in relation to readers who come from other religious and non-religious backgrounds. Importantly, it takes care to notice the nuances in the comparative

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<sup>9</sup> Joseph Wittreich, *Feminist Milton* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1987).

<sup>10</sup> Hampleman, p. 149.

<sup>11</sup> Vance Hampleman, 'Milton's Female Readership: Women and *Paradise Lost*' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Birmingham, 1992), p. 152.

subgroups and not assume shared understanding in them either. Adding to existing dialogue, an investigation into how participants interrogate patriarchy in *Paradise Lost* is touched upon in chapters in Part 2: Reader Responses to *Paradise Lost*, but chiefly in Eve's segment where such conversations are amplified.

Growing interest in Milton's female readers is further demonstrated in the recent publication of *Women (Re)Writing Milton* (2021) which appeared while this study was being conducted. Impressively, the ambitious collection of essays encompasses different ways in which Milton's work has touched the lives of diverse women across various times and spaces. In particular, the useful findings of Jameela Lares and Kayla M. Schreiber's all-day private reading of *Paradise Lost* emphasises the effect of gendered readings in controlled educational settings.<sup>12</sup> While conducting their investigation at the University of Southern Mississippi, Lares and Schreiber followed similar lines of enquiry to this study by factoring in the ages and genders of individuals in their sample group.<sup>13</sup> After providing participants with excerpts from pre-selected critics, their investigation found that regardless of participants' gender or age, they generally sympathised more with Adam (64.7 percent) and Eve (76 percent), and less with Sin (29 percent) and Satan (23.5 percent).<sup>14</sup> This reception study goes a step further, taking a more granular and intersectional approach by focussing on variables including the race, religion, class, and ethnicity of contemporary readers. Moreover, it traces the readerprints of participants who have studied the poem over longer durations of time, as opposed to a single sitting, thereby providing insight into actual experiences of reading *Paradise Lost* in their specific educational environments. The benefits of this type of examination are twofold: firstly, it considers how such settings contribute to their unique

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<sup>12</sup> Jameela Lares and Kayla M. Schreiber, 'Gendered Reflections on an All-Day Reading of *Paradise Lost*', in *Women (Re)Writing Milton*, ed. by Mandy Green and Sharihan Al-Akhras, 1st edn. (New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 213-229.

<sup>13</sup> Lares and Schreiber's report revealed that their sample group mainly comprised of female respondents. Notably, their participants were significantly older than those in this reception study.

<sup>14</sup> Lares and Schreiber, p. 218.

reading experiences; and secondly, it allows for greater understanding when uncovering how the poem is taught (see Part 3: Teaching *Paradise Lost* in UK Higher Education).

Peter Herman discusses pedagogy in relation to the poem in his book *Approaches to Teaching Milton's Paradise Lost*. The selection of essays considers how our understanding of the poem has changed due to literary theory, new scholarship, and new technologies, and offers practical advice to educators on how they can overcome problems whilst teaching the epic.<sup>15</sup> Though it is insightful, there are hardly any essays in the collection that focus on teaching the epic in a multi-cultural or multi-ethnic classroom. Achsah Guibbory's work is one of the few exceptions as she shares her experience on teaching diverse classes of students in the US. In her practice of teaching the epic, Guibbory reveals that she actively enquires about the identity of her students and shares information about her own Jewish belief. She states that this is highly effective in getting students to understand the religious differences inscribed in Milton's poem and well prepares them to grapple with the complex text. Guibbory notes that such an approach makes the classroom a place for dialogue and discovery about religious identity and interfaith relations as well as poetry.<sup>16</sup> Adding another valuable layer to this conversation, Part 3 of this thesis provides real life examples from twelve tutors across nine different UK institutions. In doing so, it discusses their varying pedagogical practices, taking into account their reactions to the UK's rapidly changing socio-political climate, as well as and their approach to working with students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds (BAME) in their universities. As a result, this study helps educators gain a fuller picture of Milton in the classroom and may help them make informed pedagogical choices in their own teaching of the poem.

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<sup>15</sup> Peter C. Herman (ed.) *Approaches to Teaching Milton's Paradise Lost*, 2nd edn (New York: Modern Language Association, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Achsah Guibbory, 'Paradise Lost and the Jews', in *Approaches to Teaching Milton's Paradise Lost*, ed. by Peter C. Herman, 2nd edn. (New York: Modern Language Association, 2012), p. 36-39.

Also investigating educational frameworks, Mahe Nau Munir Awan's unpublished doctoral thesis enumerates the challenges encountered by both male and female readers of Milton in British and Pakistani universities. Noticeably however, she overlooks both the influence of culture on readers' responses, and does not take account of the ethnic, religious, and social diversity of her group of sample readers. Awan's study concludes that in both regions, the Christian context of *Paradise Lost* is problematic for Muslim/multi-faith teaching scenarios as Muslim students displayed various forms of resistance in their learning experiences.<sup>17</sup> Curiously, Awan's investigation found no variation between the responses of UK and Pakistani students, and states that they represented identical approaches in responding to most of the questions, particularly those that involved discussions on religion.<sup>18</sup> Such findings are challenged in my own study, which by contrast, takes a fine-grained, intersectional approach to its target group of readers, paying close attention to the ways in which identity markers of ethnicity, gender, class, culture, and religion overlap. In addition to this, by examining the experiences of academics who teach *Paradise Lost* across higher educational institutions in the UK, my study takes note of precisely how teaching is a contributing factor in shaping the reader-responses of Muslim and non-Muslim students.

### **Reader-Response Theories and Practices**

As explained by Jane Tompkins, reader-response criticism is not a conceptually unified critical position, but a term that has come to be associated with the work of critics who use the words 'reader', 'the reading process', and 'response' to mark out an area for investigation.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Mahe Nau Munir Awan, 'When Muslims Read Milton: An Investigation of the Problems Encountered by Teachers and Students in a Sample of British and Pakistani Universities' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Surrey, 2012), p. 327.

<sup>18</sup> Awan, pp. 330-331.

<sup>19</sup> Jane P. Tompkins, 'An Introduction to Reader-Response Criticism', in *Reader-Response Criticism from Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. by Jane P. Tompkins (Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 1980), p. ix.

Originally pioneered by Louise Rosenblatt in her seminal work *Literature as Exploration*, reader-response theory is a literary school of thought that focuses on readers and their experiences of a text. Rosenblatt established the concept in the 1930s in opposition to both nineteenth-century literary theory and to the rising text-based literary theory of New Criticism.<sup>20</sup> Instead of attributing meaning solely to texts or their authors through biographical interpretations, the basic premise of reader-response theory is that meaning lies with the reader.

For Rosenblatt, reading is a transaction, a two-way process that involves a reader and text at a particular time under particular circumstances.<sup>21</sup> This transactional view acknowledges the entire context of the reader – their culture, past experiences and cognitive ability.<sup>22</sup> This approach sets aside the idea of a generic or universal reader as each individual is seen as offering a unique interpretation. In essence, then, a reader's personal ideologies and experiences in life work *with* a specific context, *and* a text that has its own features, to create meaning.

The reader performs the poem or the novel, as the violinist performs the sonata. But the instrument on which the reader plays and from which he evokes the work is-himself.<sup>23</sup>

Criticising formalist and post-structuralist models of understanding literature, Rosenblatt claims that they fail to do justice to the total aesthetic experience.<sup>24</sup> The aesthetic experience,

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<sup>20</sup> Jeanne M. Connell, 'Aesthetic Experiences in the School Curriculum: Assessing the Value of Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory', *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 34.1, (2000), p. 30.

<sup>21</sup> Louise M. Rosenblatt, 'The Literary Transaction: Evocation and Response', *Theory Into Practice*, 21.4, (1982), 268- 277 (268).

<sup>22</sup> Judith Rae Davis, 'Reconsidering Readers: Louise Rosenblatt and Reader-Response Pedagogy', *Research and Teaching in Developmental Education*, 8.2, (1992), 71-81 (71).

<sup>23</sup> Louise M. Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration*, 5th edn (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1995), p. 204.

<sup>24</sup> Rosenblatt, 'The Literary Transaction: Evocation and Response', p, 276.



she explains, is concerned with what readers have experienced in their reading event.<sup>25</sup> In contrast to other literary models, Rosenblatt states that her transactional view is one that appreciates the aesthetic, as it affirms readers as ‘experience builders’, and the text as an activating stimulus that serves as a guide, a regulator, a blueprint, and an avenue for interpretation. Through this process, the text activates the reader’s experiences with literature and their life, which guides for the selection, rejection, and order of what comes forth; and regulates what should be brought to the reader’s attention.<sup>26</sup> When attention is given to the aesthetic transaction, reading becomes more than an abstract mental occurrence, it becomes a mode of personal experience.<sup>27</sup> Rosenblatt states:

For years, I have extolled the potentialities of literature for aiding us to understand ourselves and others, for widening our horizons to include temperaments and cultures different from our own, for helping us to clarify out conflicts in values, for illuminating our world. I have believed, and have become increasingly convinced, that these benefits spring only from emotional and intellectual participation in evoking the work of art, through reflection on our own aesthetic experience. Precisely because every aesthetic reading of a text is a unique creation, woven out of the inner life and thought of the reader, the literary work of art can be a rich source of insight and truth.<sup>28</sup>

Supporting this, Jeanne Connell’s assessment of Rosenblatt’s transactional model highlights that it brings the reader back into the reading process and redefines literary experience as it

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<sup>25</sup> Cagri Tugrul Mart, 'Reader-Response Theory and Literature Discussions: A Springboard for Exploring Literary Texts', *New Educational Review*, 56.2, (2019), 78-87 (82).

<sup>26</sup> Mart, p. 81.

<sup>27</sup> Connell, p. 30.

<sup>28</sup> Rosenblatt, 'The Literary Transaction: Evocation and Response', pp. 276-277.

emphasises the individuality of each reader and the uniqueness of each reading event.<sup>29</sup> However, it is acknowledged by Davis that Rosenblatt's work has often remained in the margins and has frequently been omitted in reader-response anthologies. Davis suspects that this may be explained by the fact that Rosenblatt was a woman writing in a field dominated by men, or, due to the development of her theory being enmeshed with pedagogy.<sup>30</sup> Despite this, critics Todd Davis and Kenneth Womack explain that both formalist and reader-response theory provide an essential means for understanding the many ways in which meaning is produced, and emphasise that the existence of both models are lessons in themselves about the value and necessity for fluid and flexible modes of literary interpretation.<sup>31</sup>

For a Miltonic classroom in the US, Marissa Greenberg reveals that she makes an active effort to embrace the identities of students during her online classes on *Paradise Lost*. Reassuring educators that 'meeting students where they are does not mean abandoning formalism or humanism', Greenberg attests that her inclusive pedagogical technique often leads to overall enhanced discussion and higher levels of engagement among students.<sup>32</sup> With that in mind, when it comes to understanding the reception of a group which has otherwise been ignored in Milton studies, Rosenblatt's transactional model is a useful way to understand how each reader's personal ideologies and formation, alongside their contextual exposure to the poem in their higher educational institutions, have shaped their reading experience and thus their interpretation of *Paradise Lost*. To appreciate the full aesthetic experience, the model has also stressed the importance in distinguishing and making evident

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<sup>29</sup> Connell, p. 30.

<sup>30</sup> Davis, p. 71.

<sup>31</sup> Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack, *Formalist Criticism Theory and Reader-Response Theory* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 156.

<sup>32</sup> Marissa Greenberg, 'Caucusing in the Milton Classroom', paper delivered at the conference 'Renaissance Society of America 68th Annual Meeting', (Dublin, 30 March - 2 April 2022): See Tutor chapter for more detail on this.

the different factors that shape understanding. The consideration of such intersectional variables may seem beside the point to some who are more accustomed to traditional models of analysis. However, as this thesis will propose, perhaps there is a middle ground somewhere, where both the text and reader can be welcomed at the reading event.

A second reader-response theory relevant to my study is Norman Holland's psychological model which maintains that the motives of readers strongly influence how they read. The psychoanalytic critic explains that we react to literary texts with the same psychological responses we bring to events in our daily lives.<sup>33</sup> Holland understands the coping process as interpretation, and refers to this pattern as a reader's 'identity theme':

Readers use texts to project into what they are reading a combination of fantasies involving pleasure and fear, defences to manage that fear, and a transformation [...] into intellectual or moral 'sense', all of which suit that identity.<sup>34</sup>

Holland's model recognises the immediate goal of interpretation as fulfilment of a reader's psychological needs and desires. The model holds that after a reader projects an 'identity theme', wherein texts are perceived as a threat to a reader's psychological equilibrium, the reader must then interpret the text in some way that will restore that equilibrium. For Holland, interpretation is understood as a psychological process rather than an intellectual one which may not necessarily unveil the meaning of a text, but will always reveal the psychology of the reader.<sup>35</sup> While this theory does not account for how texts *expand* a reader's understanding or

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<sup>33</sup> Tyson's account provides a very good explanation on how the psychological reader-response theory operates. For more information, see: Lois Tyson, 'Psychological Reader-Response Theory', in *Critical Theory Today*, 2nd edn. (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 182-185. Another useful account can be found in: Jeremy Lane, 'Reception Theory and Reader-Response (II): Norman Holland (1927-), Stanley Fish (1938-) and David Bleich (1940-)', in *Introducing Literary Theories*, ed. by Julian Wolfreys (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), p. 465-472.

<sup>34</sup> Norman N. Holland, 'Reader-Response Criticism', *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 79.6, (1998), 1203-1211 (1206).

<sup>35</sup> Tyson, 'Psychological Reader-Response Theory', p. 183.

explain how some readers may react indifferently to material, it is a fascinating concept and worth bearing in mind when considering how respondents grapple with moments of discomfort in Milton's *Paradise Lost* - particularly in the case of Muslimahs who are faced with a story of creation that contests the Islamic tradition. Moreover, this psychological theory does not provide an explanation for how in situations where a reader's needs and desires are *not* met, they are still able to reach a sound interpretation of a text. My own view is that an interpretation can be both intellectual *and* psychological. Nonetheless, when looking at how modern-day readers encounter Milton, it will be illuminating to see how (and if) they achieve a sense of psychological and *religious* equilibrium.

Thirdly, focussing on the experience of readers, Stanley Fish's social reader-response theory makes a case that individual subjective responses are products of the 'interpretive community' to which they belong.<sup>36</sup> The interpretive community is a term he uses to refer to groups who share interpretative strategies which determine the way texts are read, as opposed to the view that the text governs its own reading.<sup>37</sup> This particular model, therefore, recognises the power of the environment and people in it, arguing that all readers come to a text already predisposed to interpret it in a certain way based on the interpretive strategies that are operating at the time they read. For example, if an educator has decided to frame their teaching of *Paradise Lost* with a sole focus on the political contexts of the seventeenth century, then students will understand the poem in light of these considerations. Importantly, Fish's theory states that interpretative communities are not static, but evolve over time.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, different communities will have different responses to texts. In contrast to Holland who is of the view that texts reveal the psychology of a reader, Fish's position is that each

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<sup>36</sup> Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

<sup>37</sup> Bennett, p. 237.

<sup>38</sup> Lois Tyson, 'Social Reader-Response Theory', in *Critical Theory Today*, 2nd edn. (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 185-187 (p.185).

interpretation will simply find whatever its interpretative strategies put there.<sup>39</sup> Despite not explaining how individuals from the *same* interpretative groups reach *different* conclusions about a text, Fish's framework is particularly helpful when considering the variable of the educational environments and seminar contexts of respondents. This is why during interviews I have taken particular care to ask Muslimah participants what was covered in their *Paradise Lost* seminars. With this information, it makes it easier to understand why certain topics are more present or absent in their minds and responses. As reflected in Part 3: Teaching *Paradise Lost* in UK Higher Education, Fish's model also sheds light on the power of tutors as they deliver their planned material and direct conversations in seminars, which in turn, has a major influence on how readerprints are coloured.

When considering a reader's gender identity, a valuable source includes the work of feminist critic Judith Fetterly. In her essay, *On the Politics of Literature*, Fetterly states that literature insists on universality at the same time that it defines that universality in specifically male terms.<sup>40</sup> This echoes the comments of Nafisa Bakker's demand for change in her essay on Muslim women and their representation in society:

In order for Muslim women to thrive in our current climate, we need to start from a point at which the default, if we must have one, is inclusive and mindful of many intersections that exist, not predicated on white males being the standard.<sup>41</sup>

Writing on the subject of male standards, Fetterly goes on to maintain that the female reader is forced to identify against herself, and calls for the discovery/rediscovery of a uniquely

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<sup>39</sup> Tyson, 'Social Reader-Response Theory', p. 186.

<sup>40</sup> Judith Fetterly, 'On the Politics of Literature', in *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), pp. xi-xxvi (p. xii).

<sup>41</sup> Nafisa Bakkar, 'On the Representation of Muslims: Terms and Conditions Apply', in *It's Not About the Burqa*, ed. by Mariam Khan (London: Picador, 2019), pp. 45-63, (p. 47).

powerful voice that is capable of cancelling out those other voices ‘which spoke about us and at us but never for us’.<sup>42</sup> This idea of the existence of ‘male texts’ and women being co-opted into them, is striking, and something worth delving deeper into when it comes to understanding the reception of *Paradise Lost*. It will be interesting to observe how male, female, Muslim, and non-Muslim participants confront this idea, which in turn can tell us if there are any shared cohorts of expectations, whether the Muslimahs reading of *Paradise Lost* makes them more alike to each other than others, or whether this expectation is shattered.

Moreover, in reader-response theory Andrew Bennett also problematises the concept of the ‘universal reader’, recognising that it ignores the differences of reading experiences of women, gay or lesbian readers, or readers from ethnic minorities.<sup>43</sup> This exemplifies precisely why it is so vital take these different facets of identity into consideration as they have the power to completely shift and alter reading perspectives. The advantage of doing so is affirmed by Fish:

If you begin by assuming that readers do something, and the something they do has meaning, you will never fail to discover a pattern of reader activities that appears obviously to be meaningful.<sup>44</sup>

To date, studies of Milton’s readers have been useful, but typically assume an ‘implied’ or ‘universal’ reader. One aim of this project, then, is to develop a different kind of research method: one that builds on the methods of reader-response studies, which gather data from actual readers, mindful of the many intersections including those of gender, race, religion,

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<sup>42</sup> Fetterly, p. xxiv.

<sup>43</sup> Bennett, p. 4.

<sup>44</sup> Stanley Fish, ‘What Makes an Interpretation Acceptable?’ in *The History of Reading*, ed. by Shafquat Towheed and Rosalind Crone (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 103.

class, culture, and sexuality, to gain a fuller, richer understanding of Milton's modern-day readers.

### **Experiences of British South-Asian Women in UK Higher Education**

A third key critical context concerns the experience of British South-Asian women in higher education in the UK. Recent sociological studies have celebrated the increased participation of British South-Asian women in higher education, and how this has enabled them to forge alternative, more empowering gender identities in comparison to previous generations. This is explained in Bagguley and Hussain's study which describes young British South-Asian women as 'cultural navigators' between the world of the migrant first generation, and the urban world of contemporary Britain.<sup>45</sup> In their research, Bagguley and Hussain argue that the changing educational fortunes of South Asian women reflect significant changes in both the gender and class relations within their communities.<sup>46</sup> With young British South-Asian women negotiating their various intersectional identities, and translating and adapting their parents' cultural and religious expectations to the very different world of urban Britain, the sociologists suggest that these women are able to maintain continuities with the past, whilst also being successful in their personal projects in the present.<sup>47</sup> Fauzia Ahmad's article also notes the steadily increasing rates of young South-Asian women in higher education, and though her preliminary research is limited to university students and graduates from London, she presents a case that questions the stereotypes that portray young South-Asian Muslim women as 'victims' and recipients of oppression in patriarchal family relations, or as women with fixed religious identities.<sup>48</sup> Akin to Bagguley and Hussain's findings, Ahmad explains

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<sup>45</sup> Paul Bagguley and Yasmin Hussain, *The Role of Higher Education in Providing Opportunities for South Asian Women* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2007), p. 47.

<sup>46</sup> Bagguley and Hussain, p. 46.

<sup>47</sup> Bagguley and Hussain, p. 47.

<sup>48</sup> Fauzia Ahmad, 'Modern Traditions? British Muslim Women and Academic Achievement', *Gender and Education*, (2001),13.2: 137-152, p. 138.

how in contrast to these views, the women in her study continually negotiate and renegotiate their cultural, religious, and personal identities.<sup>49</sup> Hussein, Johnson, and Alam go further, stating that for young British Pakistani women, higher education is a context that both enables *and* constrains negotiations of identity.<sup>50</sup> As these studies demonstrate, the notion of how identity operates for British South-Asian women in higher educational contexts is rapidly evolving. There is, however, no existing research that looks at this target group in relation to their study of literature. This thesis will enhance the conversation by providing valuable insight on how British South-Asian Muslimahs navigate their identities in collective classroom contexts, but also in their private reading experiences of *Paradise Lost*.

The importance of religion for British Muslim students was revealed in a 2020 study by Scott-Baumann et al. which found that they are much more likely than their Christian peers to treat university as an experience that engages their faith in both positive and negative ways. The study claims that Muslims appear more open to seeing university through the lens of faith and are therefore more aware of how university exerts an influence on their own expression of it.<sup>51</sup> Though the study was on the overall student experience of higher education, it prompts the question of how faith operates in more concentrated settings such as in the study of literature. Focussing on the topic of religious identity, studies have also commented on Muslim students feeling ‘alienated’ and ‘othered’ in their higher educational institutions. This is evident in Seyfuddin Kara’s work where he reflects on the experiences of Muslim youths in the British higher education system, highlighting that some students felt that their Muslim identities had somehow negatively affected their opportunities in academia. Kara emphasises the lasting impact of the 9/11 terror attacks and 7/7 London bombings,

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<sup>49</sup> Ahmad, 'Modern Traditions? British Muslim Women and Academic Achievement', p. 139.

<sup>50</sup> Ifsa Hussain, Sally Johnson, and Yunis Alam, 'Young British Pakistani Muslim women's involvement in higher education', *Feminism & Psychology*, (2017), 27.4: 408-427.

<sup>51</sup> Alison Scott-Baumann, Mathew Guest, Shuruq Naguib, Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor, and Aisha Phoenix, *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain*, 1st edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 220.



which, for some students, had exposed them to forms of racial discrimination and Islamophobia.<sup>52</sup> This is further acknowledged in another study conducted by Ahmad, which states that in some cases, students felt that those working in further and higher education were a barrier to advancement as they undermined Muslim women's educational and career ambitions.<sup>53</sup> In her investigation of educational motivations for these South Asian Muslim women, Ahmad notes the value that they placed on their learning experiences which thereby challenged stereotyped representations of their individual and familial identities. Ahmad's work categorises numerous South-Asian Muslim women as educational 'pioneers' who increase their parents' social standing and prestige, which in effect, demystifies the higher educational experience, paving the way for other women in their families and communities to also consider education as a viable and empowering option.<sup>54</sup> Studies also suggest that Muslim women challenge negative cultural perceptions of education by assuming a strong Islamic identity, which is then used as an empowering strategy by which they can participate in the public sphere.<sup>55</sup> Such remarks are fascinating, and the idea of culturally navigating and negotiating identity is something that will be investigated in my own study, which, with the application of its various methodological strategies, uncovers how South-Asian Muslimah participants encounter *Paradise Lost* in both private and more public settings.

To date, there has been a focus on the Muslim and female South Asian experience in higher education as a whole, however, there has been no close consideration on how British

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<sup>52</sup> Seyfeddin Kara, 'Muslim Youth at University: A Critical Examination of the British Higher Education Experience.', in *Muslim Youth: Challenges, Opportunities and Expectations*, ed. by Fauzia Ahmad and Mohammad Siddique Seddon (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), pp. 144-162 (p. 157).

<sup>53</sup> Fauzia Ahmad, 'Growing Up Under Lockdown' or 'Educational Pioneers'? Challenging Stereotypes of British Muslim Women in Higher Education', in *Muslim Youth: Challenges, Opportunities and Expectations*, ed. by Fauzia Ahmad and Mohammad Siddique Seddon (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 119-143, (138).

<sup>54</sup> Fauzia Ahmad, pp. 138-139.

<sup>55</sup> Katherine Brown, 'Realising Muslim Women's Rights: The Role of Islamic Identity Among British Muslim Women', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 29.4, (2006), 417-430; Claire Dwyer, 'Negotiating Diasporic Identities: Young British South Asian Muslim Women', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 23.4, (2000), 475-486.

South-Asian Muslim women navigate their complex identities in the context of a particular literary text. This study will take care to do so. To appreciate and account for the possible differences in the Muslimahs themselves, the original plan of this thesis was to consider the relative importance of the four main schools of juristic thought in Sunni Islam (Hanafiyya, Malikiyya, Shafiyya and Hanbaliyya) to the cultural formation of female readers from Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi backgrounds, as well as particular conservative or liberal inflections correlating with membership of smaller subgroups such as the Salafi, Deobandi, and Barelvī to name a few. The experiences and responses of British Asian Shia female readers, particularly of Pakistani descent, were also considered. However, when interviewing Muslimahs from these various groups, it quickly became evident that they themselves were not conscious of these finer details during our discussions. If allusions were made, they were subtle, and it was therefore difficult to see these distinct markers of theological thought play a significant role in their interpretations. I suspect that was due to my approach attending closely to experiential factors (in the actual reading and assimilation of Milton) rather than doctrinal and ideological categories which are always too narrow to contain ambiguities, such as the ones I have found. Nonetheless, this allowed for a more organic approach that looked at other factors such as culture, environment, and personality. It is with these considerations in mind, then, that this project aims to give voice to British South-Asian Muslimah readers of *Paradise Lost*, taking a cue both from recent calls to generate new questions of why, how, and where Milton matters,<sup>56</sup> and from the manifestly evident need in contemporary British society to exploit the potential of English literature for bridging, as well as diagnosing, cultural difference.

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<sup>56</sup> David Currell and François-Xavier Gleyzon (2015), 'Milton and Islam: Bridging Cultures', Special issue, 'Reading Milton through Islam', eds., David Currell and François-Xavier Gleyzon. *English Studies* 96, 1-5.

## Intersectional Theories

To grasp the concept of ‘intersectionality’, it is useful to explain what is meant by the term ‘identity’. The latter refers to who we are, and how the world sees us. Our identities shape our experiences and worldview and are the multiple characteristics, both visible and invisible, that identify us as individuals and members of a group.<sup>57</sup> Nira Yuval-Davis notes that identities are individual and collective narratives that answer the question ‘who am/are I/we?’.<sup>58</sup> While Nahid Afroze Kabir explains that they can be fluid, and in identification, the collective and the individual can occupy the same space.<sup>59</sup> In 1989, as a response to single axis frameworks such as White feminism which treated race and gender as exclusive categories of experience and analysis, critical race theorist Kimberle Crenshaw introduced ‘intersectionality’ as an alternate and inclusive model that recognised all aspects of a woman’s identity when understanding oppression.<sup>60</sup> In a later paper, Crenshaw advanced her theory with three distinct categories: 1) ‘structural intersectionality’ involves how social structures work to create different experiences for minority groups in comparison to those we are most privileged; 2) ‘political intersectionality’ indicates how inequalities and intersections are relevant to policies for groups of people who occupy multiple subordinate identities; 3) ‘representational intersectionality’ emphasises the importance of accurately representing diversity in positions of power and popular culture.<sup>61</sup> Since its conception, scholars have widely used and differently implemented the framework in their research.<sup>62</sup> Despite

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<sup>57</sup> Jamila Osman, *Navigating Intersectionality: How Race, Class, and Gender Overlap* (New York: Enslow Publishing, 2018), p. 10.

<sup>58</sup> Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Intersectionality and Feminist Politics', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 13.3, (2006), 187-298 (197).

<sup>59</sup> Nahid Afroze Kabir, *Young British Muslims: Identity, Culture, Politics and the Media*, 2nd edn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. 7-8.

<sup>60</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989.1, (1989), 139-167.

<sup>61</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review*, 43.6, (1991), 1241-1299.

<sup>62</sup> For example, in literature, intersectionality is an approach to literary analysis that invites students to consider how a range of identity factors (including race, gender, class, sexuality, to name a few) interact to shape

variances, a general accepted definition of ‘intersectionality’ today is that it investigates how intersecting power relations influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life. It views categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, ability, ethnicity, and age – among others – as interrelated and mutually shaping one another.<sup>63</sup> Collins and Chepp argue that the growing appeal and influence of intersectionality stems from an ‘epistemological recognition that a field’s dominant assumptions and paradigms are produced within a context of power relations, where white, middle-class, heterosexual, male, able-bodied experiences are taken as the (invisible) norm’.<sup>64</sup> As explained previously, this is true of Milton studies which has traditionally suffered from androcentric and Eurocentric standpoints which have assumed universality in interpretations. Elaborating further, Collins and Bilge state that intersectionality is an analytic tool that fosters more expansive understandings of collective and individual identities,<sup>65</sup> which has often been used to help identify and solve problems in structures including educational institutions:

Intersectionality is a way of understanding and explaining complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. This working definition describes intersectionality’s core insight: namely, that in a given society at a given time, power relations of race, class, and gender, for example, are not discrete and mutually exclusive entities, but rather build on each other and work together; and that, while

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character. Maureen M. Kentoff, 'Intersectional Reading', in *The Pocket Instructor: Literature: 101 Exercises for the College Classroom*, ed. by Diana Fuss and William A. Gleason (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 66-69.

<sup>63</sup> Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), p. 14.

For a useful account of the relationship between intersectional social categories, see: Nira Yuval-Davis, *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations*, 1st edn (London: SAGE Publications, 2011), pp. 7-8.

<sup>64</sup> Patricia Hill Collins and Valerie Chepp, 'Intersectionality', in *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics*, ed. by Georgina Waylen, Karen Celis, Johanna Kantola, S. Laurel Weldon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 57-87 (pp. 64-65).

<sup>65</sup> Collins and Bilge, p. 130.

often invisible, these intersecting power relations affect all aspects of the social world.<sup>66</sup>

An example of research that considers such intersections in higher education includes Kalwant Bhopal's more recent paper on intersectionality and race. Intersectionality, explains Bhopal, has become a model upon which to understand, analyse and engage with difference, in which difference itself becomes a defining feature of 'otherness'. She argues that intersectionality is to be understood as a dynamic, rather than a static process, and is based on the premise that understanding identities is a journey, one that changes through different times in history and transforms through different spaces.<sup>67</sup> The importance of exploring how women define themselves and how they in turn, are defined by society, is stressed in Bhopal's work as she argues that women's identities not only consist of the intersections of race, class, and gender, but also of religious identity which also has a significant impact.<sup>68</sup> This is reinforced by her study which is carried out on second and third generation, British born, Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi women who all studied at a university in the South East of London. Correlating with Scott-Baumann et al.'s study which recognises the importance of religion for British Muslim university students,<sup>69</sup> Bhopal notes that for the Muslim women, 'religion was a significant factor in their lives in how they defined themselves and how others defined them'.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Collins and Bilge, pp. 14-15.

<sup>67</sup> Kalwant Bhopal, 'Intersectionalities of Difference: Asian Women's Experiences of Religion, "Race," Class, and Gender in Higher Education in the United Kingdom', in *Intersectionality and Urban Education: Identities, Policies, Spaces and Power*, ed. by Carl A. Grant and Elisabeth Zwiern (North Carolina: Information Age Publishing Inc., 2014), pp. 229-245 (p. 230).

<sup>68</sup> Bhopal, p. 242.

<sup>69</sup> Alison Scott-Baumann et al., p. 220.

<sup>70</sup> Bhopal, p. 235.

Women were specifically asked how they saw their identities in relation to their experiences in higher education and also in their everyday lives. Many of the Muslim women spoke about the different aspects of their *identities*, rather their one identity.<sup>71</sup>

Bhopal goes on to question how experiences of higher education are affected by diverse identities and concludes that in the White space of the Academy, British Asian Muslim women's experiences are characterised by risk, racism and islamophobia, all of which indicate that their marginal statuses continue to be 'othered'.<sup>72</sup> Confronting the notion of otherness, Saleema Burney's paper makes a case that Muslim women construct 'robust and hybrid identities', allowing them to navigate new sites and opportunities for mutual exchange with non-Muslims as they create a space for themselves in the secular landscape of Britain.<sup>73</sup> Elsewhere, findings from Ibtihal Ramadan's study conclude that for Muslim women in academia, the intersectionality of religio-gendered identities were central to their experiences. Ramadan reveals that these women demonstrate agency and capitalise on their visible faith to 'demystify' negative perceptions about Muslims and advance their careers.<sup>74</sup> My own study contributes to this discussion by examining how the intersectional identities of my non-traditional readers operate in their higher educational experiences of studying *Paradise Lost*. It looks closely at how Muslim women navigate their various identities, and investigates whether they too feel that their marginal statuses continue to be 'othered'. Or conversely, whether literature is transformative, allowing the possibility of bridging differences and thereby providing a means to a more positive higher educational experience for Muslim women, or at a means by which negative experiences can be somewhat mitigated.

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<sup>71</sup> Bhopal, p. 235.

<sup>72</sup> Bhopal, p. 229-230.

<sup>73</sup> Saleema Burney, 'Beyond 'the Stepford Wives Syndrome' British Muslim Women Negotiating Secular Spaces', *Journal of Muslims in Europe*, 10.2, (2021), 189-209 (206).

<sup>74</sup> Ibtihal Ramadan, 'When faith intersects with gender: the challenges and successes in the experiences of Muslim women academics', *Gender and Education*, 34.1, (2021), 1-16.

Moreover, Bhopal's study highlights the different behaviours of her participants. Whilst some exhibited a sense of 'secure identity', other women emphasised how being a Muslim was associated with different types of 'risk', and that sometimes they would hide their identity if they felt they would experience negative reactions from others. The sociologist's work sheds light on a contributing factor for participant comfort and states that it was due to fact that there was a 'mixed' demographic at the university which made the environment 'more accepting'.<sup>75</sup> This demonstrates the importance of conducting research in different parts of the UK, which is crucial to obtain richer samples of Muslimah readers of *Paradise Lost*. A Muslim woman attending a university in a region with a higher Muslim population is likely to have a different experience to a Muslimah from a region where she is more of a minority. Thus, by deciphering the cultural and religious experiences of actual readers of *Paradise Lost* and paying close attention to the ways in which they engage, confront, and reconcile the themes and characters present in Milton's poem, there is an opportunity to understand how *Paradise Lost* informs the Muslimahs' negotiation of identity, and how it plays into the complex challenges faced by the modern British Muslimah in both reclaiming and reshaping socio-cultural norms and narratives. Vivaly, Helma Lutz shares the importance of reflecting on my own practice as researcher while I conduct this research, stating that it is very likely that the interviewees will use intersectionality in the construction of their life stories as much as I do in my analysis. As a result, she advises that intersectionality needs to be doubly explored on the level of the narrator (in this case, the respondents) and on the level of the analyst.<sup>76</sup> With this in mind, I take care to recognise how my own identity as a researcher and a visibly British South-Asian Muslim woman occupies certain spaces and

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<sup>75</sup> Bhopal, pp. 237- 243.

<sup>76</sup> Helma Lutz, 'Intersectionality as Method', *Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies*, 2.1-2, (2015), 39-44 (40-41).

potentially shapes my interaction with the human subjects of my study, and with the arguments I make from the evidence I collect.

### **Decolonising the Curriculum**

A final key context that is important to consider is the call for educational institutions to ‘decolonise the curriculum’. This was amplified in 2015 when the UK’s National Union of Students (NUS) ran campaigns including ‘Why is My Curriculum White?’,<sup>77</sup> ‘Liberate the Curriculum’,<sup>78</sup> and #DecoloniseEducation.<sup>79</sup> A report published by the NUS recognised the importance of such movements as it alarmingly stated that 42% of Black students did not believe that their curriculum reflected issues of diversity, equality, and discrimination.<sup>80</sup> To remedy this, social movements aimed to overturn ‘Whiteness’ and tackle the lack of diversity, and Eurocentric domination in curricula were brought to the public’s attention. Wyn Grant acknowledges the tension caused by such discourse, leading some to readily misinterpret the phenomena as ‘political correctness’ and a ‘left-wing bias’ in universities.<sup>81</sup> However, he reassures academics that it does not necessarily mean that ‘great books’ should be abandoned, but rather, a far wider range of sources need to be considered and existing texts need to be subjected to more rigorous criticism. Grant expresses that such requirements are not inconsistent with academic values and argues that it is crucial if we are to show

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<sup>77</sup> University College London, *Why is my curriculum white?* (22 December 2014) <<http://www.dtmh.ucl.ac.uk/videos/curriculum-white/>> [accessed 30 December 2022].

<sup>78</sup> NUS Connect, *Liberate the curriculum* (14 July 2020) <<https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/campaigns/liber8-education/liberate-the-curriculum>> [accessed 30 December 2022].

<sup>79</sup> NUS Connect, #DecoloniseEducation (1 October 2020) <<https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/decoloniseeducation>> [accessed 30 December 2022].

<sup>80</sup> NUS Connect, *Race for Equality: a report on the experiences of Black students in further and higher education (2011)* (28th September 2020) <<https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/race-for-equality-a-report-on-the-experiences-of-black-students-in-further-and-higher-education-2011>> [accessed 30 December 2022].

<sup>81</sup> Eleanor Harding, 'Its decolonising nonsense': Universities minister hits out at woke courses for students', *Daily Mail*, 16 November 2022; Doug Stokes, 'Universities should resist calls to ‘decolonise the curriculum’', *The Spectator*, 18 February 2019; Miles Dilworth, Eleanor Harding and Isabelle Stanley, 'Campus wokery on the march: Mail investigation reveals how universities are 'decolonising' courses to mollify activists - with Oxbridge colleges increasing 'race workshops'', *Daily Mail*, 10 October 2022.



openness to a changing and more diverse student population.<sup>82</sup> Jason Arday et al. warn that the centrality of Eurocentric epistemology which currently ‘dominates the landscape of knowledge’ is problematic as it does not reflect the multi-ethnically diverse histories within our society. They argue that the advancement and centring of an exclusionary curriculum continues to remain a vehicle for the development of discriminatory spaces and propagation of racial inequalities.<sup>83</sup> Defending the initiative, lecturer James Muldoon writes that decolonising the curriculum does not necessary mean abolishing the canon, but means a ‘fundamental reconsideration of who is teaching, what the subject matter is and how it’s being taught’.<sup>84</sup> Despite the widespread use of the term ‘decolonisation’ in public discourse, Mai Abu Moghli and Laila Kadiwal voice their concern with the concept becoming a ‘buzz term tied to a trend’. Moghli and Kadiwal feared that the concept was slowly being diluted and depoliticised, thus allowing for ‘superficial representations that fail to address racial, political and socio-economic intersectionalities’.<sup>85</sup> For true reform, Moghli and Kadiwal state:

...there needs to be a deconstruction of asymmetrical power relationships within academic spaces to allow for meaningful decolonisation in practice, and a recognition of plurality of histories, knowledge and epistemic traditions and experiences. This requires a real political will, and a change in the structure, and in the hearts and minds of those in decision-making positions, and a shift in the practices of knowledge production on all levels.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Wyn Grant, 'Decolonising the Curriculum: An Introduction', *The Political Quarterly*, 91.1, (2020), 203 (203).

<sup>83</sup> Jason Arday, Dina Zoe Belluigi and Dave Thomas, 'Attempting to break the chain: reimagining inclusive pedagogy and decolonising the curriculum within the academy', *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 53.3, (2020), 298–313 (300).

<sup>84</sup> James Muldoon, 'Academics: it's time to get behind decolonising the curriculum', *The Guardian*, 20 March 2019.

<sup>85</sup> Mai Abu Moghli and Laila Kadiwal, 'Decolonising the curriculum beyond the surge: Conceptualisation, positionality and conduct', *London Review of Education*, 19.1, (2021), 1-16 (1).

<sup>86</sup> Mai Abu Moghli and Laila Kadiwal, p.13.

A 2021 multi-disciplinary case study<sup>87</sup> conducted at the University of Leicester (which has over a 52% student population from BAME backgrounds) found that Muslim South-Asian students studying Biology felt that they were subject to ethnic and religious-based anti-education stereotypes and biases, which negatively affected their grades.<sup>88</sup> Overall, the study reported:

Students asserted that there is a visible lack of racial and ethnic diversity within our faculties when compared to the levels of diversity that exists within our student body. A similar point was made about the relatively (low) number of staff who are explicitly interested in race. Both points meant that for black and South Asian students interested studying modules and narratives that directly related to them or finding a project supervisor who was racially or academically ‘aligned’ with their research interest, was an experience confined predominantly to our white student cohort.<sup>89</sup>

Shortly after the publication of this report in 2021, structural changes were implemented at the University of Leicester as part of their ‘shaping for excellence’ plans. One consequence of the structural changes was a number of redundancies in departments including English, History, and Law. It is interesting to note that this was despite the fact that the aforementioned study did not include students of History and English. Nonetheless, while academics rallied in support for staff who had lost their positions,<sup>90</sup> the University of

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<sup>87</sup> This study was conducted on BAME students of Biology, Physics, Law and Sociology.

<sup>88</sup> University of Leicester, *Tackling Racial Inequalities in Assessment in Higher Education A Multi-Disciplinary Case Study* (May 2021) <<http://le.ac.uk/-/media/uol/docs/news/tackling-racial-inequalities-in-assessment-in-he-may-21.pdf>> [accessed 30 December 2022].

<sup>89</sup> University of Leicester, *Tackling Racial Inequalities in Assessment in Higher Education A Multi-Disciplinary Case Study*.

<sup>90</sup> BBC News, 'University of Leicester staff join call for global boycott', *BBC News*, 5 May 2021.

Leicester argued that it was due to a ‘drop in demand’ for some subjects and was necessary for long term improvement. This case highlights the precarious landscape of academia today, particularly with humanities disciplines such as English Literature which are, across the UK, seeing dwindling numbers of student applicants. As Part 3: Teaching *Paradise Lost* in Higher Education illustrates, Milton’s epic is not immune from this downward trend. The challenge then, is to find a way to teach the seventeenth-century epic that engages *all* students in the classroom, including BAME students, while also fulfilling the course requirements. By taking account of the UK’s rapidly changing socio-political climate and educational landscape, this thesis will investigate how tutors of *Paradise Lost* are addressing calls to decolonise the curriculum through their individual practices and in doing so, will reveal how *Paradise Lost* can be a meaningful text for all.

## Literature Review

### Research Approach

In this study I aimed to uncover how *Paradise Lost* was read and understood by modern day and non-traditional Muslimah readers by examining how their intersectional identities may have coloured their readerprints. To illustrate a fuller picture of the educational contexts of these readers, I also investigated the experiences of tutors of Milton, reflecting on their varying pedagogical practices, their reactions to the UK's rapidly changing socio-political climate, and their approach to working with students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds (BAME) in their universities. To achieve these objectives, my research approach for this reception study was largely qualitative. This contrasts to quantitative research where close-ended questions test objective theories by examining the relationship between variables. Conversely, qualitative research uses open-ended lines of enquiry to explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. It focuses on individual meaning, and the importance of reporting the complexity of a situation.<sup>1</sup> This was an appropriate approach to take given the nature of this study.

Moreover, my research followed an inductive approach, starting with participants' views and building up to broader patterns, themes, theories, and interpretations.<sup>2</sup> This was the most sensible and logical way to carry out my investigation as it required qualitative methods to explore the real-life experiences of readers and educators on a topic that had not yet been explored in Milton studies.

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<sup>1</sup> John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th edn (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2018), pp. 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> John W. Creswell and Vicki L. Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 3rd edn (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2017), pp. 37-38.

## Participants in the Study

To achieve my research objectives, I collected and analysed the reading experiences of a total of 67 participants situated in the UK and abroad. The target group of non-traditional readers comprised 10 British South-Asian Muslim women of Bangladeshi, Indian, and Pakistani descent. Two of these Muslimah participants were of Pakistani heritage and identified as biracial. An additional 3 female Muslim participants who volunteered to take part in the study were Canadian nationals with Bangladeshi heritage. A comparator group of non-Muslim readers comprised 14 Christians, 2 Jews, 1 Hindu, 13 lapsed Christian, 1 lapsed Muslim, and 23 atheist respondents. This group comprised 41 female respondents, 11 male respondents, and 2 non-binary respondents. The 12 tutors who participated in the study were from nine universities: five Russell Group universities in the West Midlands, East Midlands, Southwest, Northeast, and London; three plate glass universities in the North West, East Midlands, and West Midlands; and one post-1992 university in the East Midlands. The latter sample comprised 2 male and 9 female tutors, all of whom were interviewed about their experiences of teaching *Paradise Lost* in UK higher education.

## Research Methods

When conducting this investigation, I opted to use so-called ‘methodological triangulation’. This approach involved using a range of data collection methods, including questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. As Michael Patton observes, the logic of triangulation is based on the premise that no single method ever adequately solves the problem of rival explanations; therefore, multiple methods of data collection and analysis are necessary to provide useful material for research.<sup>3</sup> The triangulation method is recognised as a powerful

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Quinn Patton, 'Enhancing the Quality and Credibility of Qualitative Analysis', *Health Services Research*, 34.5, (1999), 1189-1208 (1192).

way of increasing the validity or ‘appropriateness’ of the tools, processes, and data used in qualitative studies.<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that the original plan for this thesis was to include a third method of data collection. This involved using focus groups to observe how participants operated in a moderated group setting. However, due to unforeseen external events impinging on my fieldwork activity such as UK nationwide industrial action in the higher education sector and the COVID-19 pandemic, it became increasingly logistically difficult to liaise with universities and arrange and hold focus groups. I had also planned to learn from the ‘reading journals’ of participants reading and responding to *Paradise Lost* over a sustained period of time. This method of recording a reader’s responses over several months would have provided insight into the ways responses developed over time. However, due to the difficulty of gaining access to students, and the large scope of the study already, I decided against including this method. Nevertheless, the data collection methods that I was able to use increased the validity of my research and provided me with multiple perspectives of readers and educators, thereby enriching my study’s exploration of how the poem is read and understood today. These methods included online questionnaires for readers of *Paradise Lost*, which were then followed by semi-structured interviews for a selected number of these participants. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with tutors who had taught the poem across UK institutions, adding another fascinating dimension to this study.

I also used ‘data triangulation’ in the study, which involved the collection of data from different types of people (including individuals belonging to different groups and communities) to gain multiple perspectives and validate research.<sup>5</sup> This was demonstrated through the sampling of readers with a variety of intersectional backgrounds. Comparing

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<sup>4</sup> Cohen, p. 265; Lawrence Leung, 'Validity, Reliability, and Generalizability in Qualitative Research', *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care*, 4.3, (2015), pp. 324-327; Nancy Carter, Denise Bryant-Lukosius, Alba DiCenso, Jennifer Blythe, and Alan J Neville, 'The Use of Triangulation in Qualitative Research', *Oncology Nursing Forum*, 41.5, (2014), 545-547 (545).

<sup>5</sup> Carter et al., p. 545.

these interpretations yielded valuable insight into how cross-cultural and interfaith dialogue operated in the context of reading *Paradise Lost* in multicultural Britain. Data triangulation also required me continuously to compare and cross-check the consistency of information derived at different times and by different means.<sup>6</sup> This meant that when inconsistencies existed in participants' privately completed questionnaire responses in comparison to their in-person interviews, I was able to reflect on how the data collection methods contributed to these occurrences. Watford and Massey point out that common errors in triangulation include researchers using it to reinforce or prove the truth of the first method.<sup>7</sup> To avoid making this mistake, I was attentive to the limitations of each method and carefully coded each set of findings separately before cross-referencing any patterns and themes. My rationale for choosing these data collection methods will be explained in this chapter, alongside my approaches to analysing the data through coding and transcription.

### **Questionnaires**

As this study required an analysis of the experience of readers who had studied *Paradise Lost* across various parts of the UK, selecting questionnaires as one form of research method proved to be a logical and practical way to proceed. Online questionnaires allowed collection of data from a large sample while remaining cheap, reliable, valid, and easy to complete for participants.<sup>8</sup> Before conducting my research on readers of *Paradise Lost*, I first had to discover where these participants were located. This was a lengthy process, which will be discussed in more detail when reflecting on ethical considerations, but it primarily involved compiling a list of all UK universities and contacting over 120 lecturers and tutors of early

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<sup>6</sup> Patton, p. 1195.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Massey, 'Methodological Triangulation, or How to Get Lost Without Being Found Out', in *Studies in Educational Ethnography*, ed. by Alexander Massey and Geoffrey Walford (Connecticut: Jai Press Inc, 1999), p. 188.

<sup>8</sup> Cohen et al., p. 471.

modern English literature at these institutions. To get a better view of where Milton was being taught, and to whom, I used the online platform SurveyMonkey to design a simple questionnaire (see [Appendix D](#)). This presented nine quantitative questions to tutors on when *Paradise Lost* was being taught, what the modules were, and the approximate number of female Muslim students enrolled on the courses. I made sure to keep this survey brief as I did not want to deter tutors from potentially taking part in my study in its later stages. Though SurveyMonkey only allowed a total number of 40 responses, this procedure was illuminating as it provided valuable information on where I could concentrate my efforts and find my target sample of readers.

When it came to collecting readers' data, I required my core research method to be far reaching and inviting but I did not have the resources to provide incentives. It was therefore vital to find other ways to appeal to participants. To do this, I carefully designed an online questionnaire using Qualtrics data collection software so that participants could easily access the survey and complete it remotely from any part of the world. Using Qualtrics meant that the questionnaire did not necessarily have to be completed in one sitting but allowed participants the option to resume and complete the session at their convenience, which many chose to do. This helped to alleviate some of the pressure that participants felt in thinking that the survey had time constraints. I made it clear in the email communications and the consent form (see [Appendix C](#)) that the survey would take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete, and that participation was voluntary. All respondents were made aware that they could withdraw their responses at any time. The importance of considering the demands on respondents is highlighted by Cohen et al. who explain that strain can lead to poor-quality or incorrect responses, non-response, or quitting.<sup>9</sup> Though I managed to collect a total of 67 questionnaire responses, there were still a number of participants (approximately 12) who

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<sup>9</sup> Cohen et al., p. 474.



started the sessions, but did not provide sufficient information for me to include their responses in the final count.<sup>10</sup> Attempting to mitigate this, I sent polite follow-up emails providing participants with a link to resume should they wish to; unfortunately, these invitations were left unanswered. This may have been down to a number of factors; for instance, uncompleted responses may have been related to technological issues, participants may have initially selected the link out of curiosity and then decided not to go ahead, or they may have changed their minds about participating after briefly previewing the questions. Unless participants themselves reveal the reasons behind this, it is impossible to know why this occurred, highlighting that some things are beyond a researcher's control.

When devising the format of the Qualtrics online questionnaire, I had to carefully consider what approach would work best and opted for a predominantly semi-structured approach. Cohen et al. usefully explain this framework:

Here a series of questions, statements or items are presented and the respondents are asked to answer, respond to or comment on them as they wish. There is a clear structure, sequence and focus, but the format is open ended, enabling respondents to reply in their own terms. The semi-structured questionnaire sets the agenda but does not presuppose the nature of the response.<sup>11</sup>

It was important to strike a balance when asking students to reflect thoughtfully on their reading experiences while doing so in a manner that was not too tiresome or demanding. The semi-structured questionnaire approach thus allowed participants to state as much or as little as they were comfortable with. I was mindful that a lengthy questionnaire could result in

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<sup>10</sup> For most of these respondents, they signed the electronic consent form and/or filled in their identification details but did not go any further. Qualtrics enables researchers to see the duration of time that participants spent on the survey. On average, these respondents had the online questionnaire open for 0-2 minutes.

<sup>11</sup> Cohen et al., p. 475.

‘respondent fatigue’,<sup>12</sup> leading participants to give poor quality answers or withdraw their interest. Therefore, aside from the initial questions on participant identification where it was mandatory for respondents to complete these segments before progressing onto the next step, I did not place any restrictions on their ability to preview the remainder of the questionnaire. This meant that participants were free to skip questions and return to them later if they desired. A further advantage of using Qualtrics was that it automatically bypassed questions that were not directly relevant to the participants which saved a great deal of time. For example, in response to Question 2 ([Appendix E](#)), if participants indicated that they did not identify with any religion, they would skip forward to Question 5. I designed the format of the questionnaire to present further lines of enquiry for Muslim participants, once they had confirmed their religious identification. This funnelling process allowed me to filter my participants and was helpful for those who may have found a paper-based questionnaire more time consuming and challenging to complete.

Within this semi-structured framework, a series of multiple choice and open-ended questions were presented to the participants. My rationale for having a mixture of the two was to combat potential boredom and fatigue by keeping the participants engaged. While answers with greater depth were encouraged in the open-ended questions, the multiple-choice sections were less demanding and did not require as much energy to complete. This aimed to provide relief for the participants as they carried out the survey. As researchers note, including open-ended questions is a useful mechanism to put the ownership and responsibility of data more firmly into respondents’ hands. In effect, these types of enquiries catch the authenticity, richness, depth of response, honesty and candour of participants which are hallmarks of valid qualitative data.<sup>13</sup> Redline et al. warn that using open-ended questions

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<sup>12</sup> Martyn Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide*, 6th edn (London: McGraw-Hill Education, 2017), p. 185-186.

<sup>13</sup> Cohen et al., p. 475.

can lead to respondents overlooking instructions as they become more occupied with the demanding tasks of writing than properly reading instructions.<sup>14</sup> To overcome this challenge and avoid misinterpretation; alongside changing the pace by utilising different question formats, I presented the questions in a clear and simple fashion. I also included more stimulating questions where participants were asked to describe their responses towards certain characters in *Paradise Lost* (see questions 9-13 in Appendix E). In these cases, I provided the exact same wording for each figure in the poem and underlined their names. After previewing similar questions numerous times, if participants suspected that they misunderstood it earlier, they had an option to go back and amend their responses. Though each question had a different character focus, as researcher, it was important to stay consistent with my word choices as the investigation did not seek to pre-empt responses or suggest favour or disapproval towards any character or idea. The same logic was applied to the multiple-choice questions (see questions 14-18 in Appendix E) which presented participants with an identical selection of adjectives to describe each figure. This format allowed participants free choice, where they were permitted to tick as many as they wished from the list. Importantly, they were also granted the space to add their own descriptors in an 'other' box if any came to mind.

Oppenheim remarks that each question has a covert function, which is to motivate the respondent to continue to co-operate.<sup>15</sup> In terms of sequencing, then, the ordering of questions was vital to consider. To attain the best results from my sample, I devised the online questionnaire to first ask participants general and easy questions about their identity, and then move on to asking participants questions about their subjective reading experiences in

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<sup>14</sup> Cleo D. Redline, D. Dillman, L. Carley-Baxter and R. Creecy, 'Factors that influence reading and comprehension of branching instructions in self-administered questionnaires', *Allgemeines Statistisches Archiv*, 89, (2005), 21- 38.

<sup>15</sup> A. N. Oppenheim, *Questionnaire Design, Interviewing and Attitude Measurement* (London: Continuum, 1992), p. 121.

relation to certain characters. For longer questionnaires such as this, researchers have recommended presenting participants with the vital questions in the first half of the questionnaire.<sup>16</sup> This is so that if respondents were to become lethargic by the end, the most important questions would have received better quality responses. Crucially, to avoid question order bias,<sup>17</sup> I placed questions on participants' religious, cultural, and social attitudes while reading *Paradise Lost* towards the end of the survey. This was important as it revealed that while some participants actively referred to their religious, cultural, and social ideals throughout the survey, for others, connections (or lack of) were only mentioned when they were directly asked.

Before promoting the survey, I took great care to enhance the reliability, validity, and practicality of the data collection method by conducting piloting. This meant that I carried out several test sessions to assess the effectiveness of the questionnaire and see how it could be improved. Piloting was incredibly helpful as it gave me an opportunity to identify and resolve any issues before implementing the full survey. By observing others complete the form, I was able to measure time and check whether the questions, overall format, and layout were suitable. Oppenheim stresses the importance of piloting and argues that every single aspect of a questionnaire (including its physical appearance) should be rigorously tested.<sup>18</sup> I suspected that many participants would receive the link to participate on their mobile phones and would choose to complete the survey on the same devices. I recognised that this could be a potential problem as web links do not always translate as smoothly on smaller screens, leading respondents to feel discouraged and disengaged by the process. Therefore, to avoid glitches and participant frustration, I optimised their experience by using Qualtrics to carefully design

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<sup>16</sup> Cohen et al., p. 493.

<sup>17</sup> 'Question order bias arises when the sequence of two or more questions dealing with the same or similar issues influences the answers obtained': Mads Thau, Maria Falk Mikkelsen, Morten Hjortskov and Mogens Jin Pedersen, 'Question order bias revisited: A split-ballot experiment on satisfaction with public services among experienced and professional users', *Public Administration*, 99.1, (2021), 189-205 (192).

<sup>18</sup> Oppenheim, p.48.

a mobile friendly version of the questionnaire. From a technological standpoint, this aimed to help all participants to have a positive experience when sharing their readerprints, regardless of which interface they chose to use.

Another potential problem of this data collection method was its susceptibility of being affected by social desirability bias. Anton Nederhof explains that social desirability bias reflects the tendency of the subjects to deny socially undesirable traits and to claim socially desirable ones, and the tendency to say things which place the speaker in a favourable light.<sup>19</sup> This was a key cause for concern in this study which asked participants to reflect on their intersectional identities while reading *Paradise Lost*. If respondents were to succumb to feelings of social desirability, they would be less likely to reveal their true thoughts which would be detrimental to the study. To mitigate the impact of this, I strove to help participants feel safe to share their thoughts and reassured them that all names would be anonymised, and that data would be treated confidentially. My hope was that this would tackle the issue to some degree. By using an online format to collect data, I reduced my immediate presence as researcher which allowed respondents the privacy to complete their responses without feeling too pressured. In most cases, I found that these collective steps encouraged participants to be honest and confident in their admissions. This was aided by the survey's careful and neutral wording which was also a way to encourage participants to speak freely and minimise the risk of social desirability bias. Using methodological triangulation made it easier to identify cases where suspected bias did occur. Interestingly however, these instances were nonetheless illuminating and often added another complex layer to the conversation about how respondents chose to portray and express themselves when sharing their experiences of reading *Paradise Lost*.

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<sup>19</sup> Anton J. Nederhof, 'Methods of Coping with Social Desirability Bias: A Review', *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 15.3, (1985), 263-280 (264).

## Interviews

An important aim of this project was to honour and recognise readers as individuals with distinct readerprints, and to refrain from treating them as a universal concept. My choice in selecting interviews as an additional research method was primarily due to it being a social, interpersonal encounter, and not merely a data-collection exercise.<sup>20</sup> This multi-faceted approach suited my aim as it was crucial to spot the nuances between responses and avoid presenting my target group of female Muslim readers as a homogenous group. Though using online questionnaires had numerous benefits, it was difficult to gain evidence of the complex nature of different responses to the poem from a single data collection method. Therefore, to further my understanding on a deeper analytic level, I required a second method that was direct and inquisitive yet more personal in its approach. It was necessary to pick up on verbal and non-verbal cues beyond words presented on a screen. I believed this could be achieved by engaging in direct conversation with participants and observing them while they shared their experiences. To this end, I conducted two sets of in-depth semi-structured interviews (also known as semi-standardised interviews) with 8 participants who had completed the questionnaire, and a further 12 interviews with tutors who had taught the poem in a variety of UK higher education institutions.

Lune and Berg explain that the semi-structured interview approach involves asking interviewees predetermined questions on special topics, where questions are asked in a systematic and consistent order. Importantly, this framework allows interviewers freedom to digress and the power to probe far beyond the answers to their pre-prepared questions.<sup>21</sup> This was the most sensible way to proceed with this investigation as a structured (standardised)

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<sup>20</sup> Cohen et al., p. 506.

<sup>21</sup> Howard Lune and Bruce Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences, Global Edition* (Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 2017), p. 69.

interview would have had rigid and stringent lines of questioning and would not have inspired confidence in my participants or motivated them to share their first, second, and sometimes, third thoughts. By contrast, an unstructured (unstandardised) interview approach would have had made comparisons between interviews more difficult, and would also have heightened the risk of research questions not being properly asked or adequately answered. The semi-structured interview approach was thus a middle ground that allowed careful preparation, but also the freedom to adapt my interview agenda to suit the particular characteristics of each individual interviewee.

Using this qualitative semi-structured framework, I carried out in-depth, face-to-face interviews with readers of *Paradise Lost*. These interviews were directed toward understanding participants' perspectives on their lives, experiences, or situations as expressed in their own words.<sup>22</sup> Carter et al. explain that in-depth interviews are a powerful method that allow for spontaneity, flexibility, and responsiveness; however, they also recognise that considerable time and effort is required to conduct the interviews, transcribe the conversation, and analyse the texts.<sup>23</sup> This was certainly true to my experience as I quickly realised how costly interviews were: 1) of my time; and 2) financially, given that train travel to other cities to interview participants was often required.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, to produce high quality interviews, avoid data overload and too much strain on my part, I made a practical decision to concentrate my efforts on interviewing a smaller sample of readers. The interview sample of

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<sup>22</sup> Steven J. Taylor, *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: A Guidebook and Resource*, 4th edn (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons Inc, 2016), p. 102

<sup>23</sup> Nancy Carter, Denise Bryant-Lukosius, Alba DiCenso, Jennifer Blythe, and Alan J Neville, 'The Use of Triangulation in Qualitative Research', *Oncology Nursing Forum*, 41.5, (2014), 545-547 (545).

<sup>24</sup> I presented participants the option to conduct interviews online or in-person. In all cases, participants preferred in-person meetings. In retrospect, I believe that this was advantageous as it helped establish rapport, allowing both myself and the participants to feel more at ease.

readers was predominantly made up of my target group of British South-Asian Muslimahs, and one non-Muslim respondent:<sup>25</sup>

*Table 1 - Interviews conducted with readers of Paradise Lost*

Pseudonym	Participant Background	Date of Interview	Interview Duration
Ansar	Female, British Pakistani (Kashmiri), Muslim	13 <sup>th</sup> November 2019	22 minutes
Manal	Female, British Indian, Muslim	19 <sup>th</sup> November 2019	25 minutes
Jane	Female, British, Atheist	19 <sup>th</sup> November 2019	41 minutes
Sannah	Female, British Pakistani, Muslim	20 <sup>th</sup> November 2019	49 minutes
Alya	Female, British Biracial Pakistani/Scottish, Muslim	13 <sup>th</sup> December 2019	1 hour 8 minutes
Hana	Female, British Bangladeshi, Muslim	21 <sup>st</sup> February 2020	30 minutes
Riya	Female, British Pakistani, Muslim	29 <sup>th</sup> May 2021	1 hour 5 minutes
Nusayba	Female, British Biracial Pakistani/Egyptian, Muslim	5 <sup>th</sup> August 2021	51 minutes

My sampling strategy was ‘purposive’, which describes a non-random way of ensuring that British-South Asian Muslimahs were represented in the final sample of the

<sup>25</sup> Jane’s interview was conducted in the earlier stages of fieldwork. Unfortunately, however, due to the already heavy workload and time constraints, it was not practical to continue interviewing other participants outside of the target sample of readers.



project.<sup>26</sup> I selected these participants by analysing their questionnaire responses, and then invited them to share more about their experiences in semi-structured in-depth interviews. All readers who were invited to an interview accepted the invitation. I gather that this was because they enjoyed completing the online questionnaire and were keen to share more on their personal experiences of reading the poem with someone who took an interest. Intriguingly, all but one participant (Riya) knew I was a female Muslim researcher before the interview began. After our fascinating discussion, it was not until after the interview that Riya revealed her assumption in thinking that I was a “white brunette”, and not a brown-skinned woman wearing a headscarf. This realisation could perhaps account for why there were differences between Riya’s questionnaire response, where she minimised religious and socio-cultural influences in her reading, and her interview, where she was more forthcoming in discussing these topics. In any case, this demonstrates the power of different research methods and how interviewing readers was advantageous as it allowed me to delve deeper into their questionnaire responses and uncover new findings.

As Irving Seidman notes, the root of in-depth interviewing lies in an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience.<sup>27</sup> In-depth interviewing for my project involved asking participants to share their experiences of how *Paradise Lost* was taught in their educational contexts, then asking further questions relating to their religious and cultural backgrounds where applicable (see [Appendix F](#) for a brief outline of interview questions). It was crucial to build rapport with informants so that they felt comfortable to share details of their personal feelings, beliefs, and cultural backgrounds. To achieve this, I made sure to conduct the interviews at a time and

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<sup>26</sup> The rationale for employing a purposive strategy is that the researcher assumes that certain categories of individuals may have a unique, different, or important perspective on the phenomenon in question and their presence in the sample should be ensured. See: Oliver C. Robinson, 'Sampling in Interview-Based Qualitative Research: A Theoretical and Practical Guide', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 11.1, (2014), 25-41 (32).

<sup>27</sup> Irving Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*, 3rd edn (New York: Teachers College Press, 2006), p. 9.

place most convenient for them. I took great care when sequencing questions and started with more general ones such as ‘when/where did you study *Paradise Lost*?’ before gradually moving on to more sensitive topics that probed their questionnaire responses, personal lives, and beliefs. To avoid giving the impression that participants were being interrogated in an unfair or intrusive manner, I strove to treat them as equals so that they felt encouraged to share their views.<sup>28</sup> In practice, this meant treating interviews as a conversation where I signalled understanding, probed the remarks made by the interviewee, and introduced new lines of enquiry depending on where the conversation was going. Importantly, though I gave the impression that we were equals, I ensured that the interview exchange was centred around the participant’s views and not my own. Participants were more likely to feel seen and understood this way, which helped to elicit honest responses and tackle potential social desirability bias where they would have given responses based on what they thought I wanted to hear.

To further establish trust, at the start of all interviews (for both readers and tutors), I made interviewees aware that they would be assigned pseudonyms, and stated that they were welcome to skip, come back to, clarify, or redact any of their statements. I reassured participants that even after the interviews were completed, if upon further reflection they wanted to redact any comments, their wishes would be respected. By actively stressing the importance of the participants’ comfort and respecting their needs throughout the whole process, good rapport was established which allowed the interviews to flow smoothly.

My positionality as a similar aged woman with shared cultural and religious connections with many of the participants was undoubtedly a factor that contributed to the success of the interviews. Researchers recognise that having similar characteristics and

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<sup>28</sup> The in-depth interview is modelled after a conversation between equals rather than a formal question-and-answer exchange: Taylor, p. 102.

shared experiences with respondents is advantageous as it helps to build rapport.<sup>29</sup> Familiarity with participants was certainly helpful in a reception-study of this nature which involved asking them to share details of their personal beliefs and backgrounds. In Nusayba's case for example, I noticed her taking comfort in referring to Islamic religious tradition collectively as "our religion", while Sannah gleefully reflected on our shared undergraduate seminar environment. While these familiarities were welcomed, it also pointed to a risk of 'interviewer bias', or the 'halo effect' where my objectivity could be compromised due to an unconscious bias or a particular impression of a respondent. To combat this, it was helpful to have a blueprint of pre-prepared questions that I used for all interviews which ensured fairness. Attempting to avoid interviewer bias in my role as researcher, I also deliberately slowed down my process of analysis and compared interview responses only after they had all been transcribed and carefully coded, which allowed a more complete and rounded view of the material. A further limitation of interviews is that in comparison to questionnaires they are difficult to replicate which renders them less reliable. This is due to there being numerous variables at play. These include time, location, bond and moods of researcher and respondent, and style and sequence of questioning which all work together to form the overall interview exchange. Replicating these exact circumstances with any interviewee would be immensely difficult. Nonetheless, this issue makes evident the importance of assuring that all variables are carefully thought out to achieve a productive and positive interview experience for both researcher and respondent - which I always strove to do. When interviewing Muslimahs, for example, I was mindful of prayer times and ensured that they were comfortable with when the interviews were scheduled to take place.

A semi-structured interview approach was also selected when it came to interviewing tutors about their experiences of teaching *Paradise Lost* in UK higher education.

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<sup>29</sup> Lune and Berg, p. 82.

Though I followed similar protocol and drafted an interview agenda which had a variety of areas that I planned to discuss (see [Appendix G](#) for a brief outline of interview questions), conducting tutor interviews had their own set of challenges. Firstly, unlike my sample of readers who filled out an online questionnaire before interviews, I did not have an existing sample of tutors. I had to develop a network and rely on academics who kindly facilitated new connections with others. Emailing tutors with invitations to participate was not always successful, and I was often met with silence, or refusals on the grounds that they were otherwise occupied. This was understandable given their already busy workloads amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The global pandemic also meant that I no longer had the option to conduct in-person interviews. Even if these were possible, I knew that the chances of me getting tutors to agree to meet in-person would be slim given how difficult it was even to arrange online interviews. I quickly adjusted my expectations. Conducting tutor interviews online via Skype and Zoom did have its advantages as it meant saving on travelling costs and allowed greater flexibility with scheduling. To optimise tutors' comfort, I worked around their convenience and was pleased to secure interviews from twelve educators at nine different UK higher education institutions:

*Table 2 -Interviews conducted with Tutors who have taught Paradise Lost*

Pseudonym	Participant Background	Date of Interview	Interview Duration
Jeremy	Male, Professor, Russell Group university in the West Midlands	11 <sup>th</sup> May 2020	1 hour 2 minutes
Savannah	Female, Senior Lecturer, Russell Group university in London	15 <sup>th</sup> June 2020	48 minutes

Madelyn	Female, Early Career Fellow, Russell Group university in London	3 <sup>rd</sup> July 2020	1 hour 13 minutes
Morgan	Female, Associate Professor, Russell Group university in East Midlands	6 <sup>th</sup> July 2020	26 minutes
Helen	Female, Professor, Russell Group university in East Midlands	16 <sup>th</sup> July 2020	1 hour 5 minutes
Vivian	Female, Associate Professor, Russell Group university in East Midlands	21 <sup>st</sup> February 2020	26 minutes
Raven	Female, Senior Lecturer, plate glass university in the Northwest	24 <sup>th</sup> November 2020	42 minutes
Cora	Female, Reader, post-1992 university in the Northwest	1 <sup>st</sup> March 2022	1 hour 50 minutes
Kathy	Female, Senior Lecturer, plate glass university in the West Midlands	11 <sup>th</sup> March 2022	54 minutes
Martin	Male, Senior Lecturer, Russell Group university in the Southwest	17 <sup>th</sup> March 2022	55 minutes
Lyra	Female, Senior Lecturer, plate glass university in the East Midlands	18 <sup>th</sup> March 2022	42 minutes
Rose	Female, Professor, Russell Group university in the Northeast	28 <sup>th</sup> April 2022	55 minutes

To put the tutors at ease, I offered to send a sample of the interview questions in advance.<sup>30</sup> Most participants accepted this invitation which gave them time to prepare before the interviews began. For the most part, I found this action of sharing the interview agenda to be beneficial as it meant that answers were often well thought out and clearly expressed. On occasion, however, I deduced that some tutors were purposefully vague in response to some questions. When I encountered what I took to be discomfort with particular lines of questioning, I reacted by respectfully moving on to the next section. To my surprise, one of the shortest interviews I conducted was with a tutor who did not preview the questions but was still able to provide the most succinct answers. In the case of another tutor who had not pre-prepared, however, the interview duration was significantly longer as the respondent tended to go off-topic. Despite this, I found that patience and cooperation was crucial as it helped to build good rapport with this tutor who later went on to give extraordinarily rich insights into pedagogical practices within her institution. Being attentive to each interviewee's needs was a key factor in achieving successful interviews.

The sequence of questions in my interviews with tutors resembled that used in my interviews of student readers; that is, I asked general questions to begin with before moving onto questions of a more sensitive nature. Lune and Berg explain that the underlying rationale for sequencing questions this way is that it allows the interviewer and the participant to develop a rapport before more serious and important questions are asked. They argue that it also fosters a degree of commitment on the part of the interviewee, since he or she will have already invested time in the interview by answering easy questions.<sup>31</sup> Tutor interviews typically started with generic questions on their background of teaching Milton, followed by

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<sup>30</sup> Though the option to preview questions was given to tutors, when interviewing readers, this was not practical as the interview agendas were more personalised and depended on their individual questionnaire responses. However, if they requested more information, I provided them with a brief outline of what would be discussed in interviews.

<sup>31</sup> Lune and Berg, p. 72.

questions on their classroom atmosphere and demographic, and then questions regarding decolonising the curriculum. I was aware that the latter sections would be more complex to discuss and made sure to end with a segment that focussed on each tutor's teaching methods and resources. It was important that the interviews ended with tutors feeling appreciated and confident in their decision to partake in the study. If this was not the case, participants knew that they had the right to withdraw their contribution, which thankfully none chose to do. It is also worth noting that I detected slight concern in some tutors who wanted an extra verbal assurance that their names would be changed. This was honoured, of course, and the reassurance provided them with a sense of relief. In a climate where academic jobs are precarious and attitudes towards how English Literature is taught is rapidly changing, their concerns were completely understandable.

Whilst the global pandemic was ongoing, I was fortunate to be able to continue conducting fieldwork through virtual interviews. The normalisation of internet meetings during this precarious period made it easier to engage in conversation and complete my research. Despite this, there were some noticeable pitfalls of conducting interviews online. For instance, there were times where connectivity issues or background noise disrupted the flow of conversation and caused a loss of data. In the case of one tutor interview, I could not see the participant on the screen for the entirety of the session as her camera was dysfunctional. Visual and auditory information usually combined to inform my view of how each online interview was going. I placed great importance on non-verbal cues such as body language and a loss of visuals in this regard was quite a setback as I had to rely solely on audio for cues on how she was responding to the questions. This meant that we mistakenly interrupted each other quite frequently and it took a while for each of us to get accustomed to each other's patterns of thinking and speaking. Despite these obstacles, I found that open

communication on both sides helped to alleviate anxieties, lighten the mood, and make the process of interviewing easier.

### **Data Analysis**

This study practiced methodological triangulation by using questionnaires and interviews as its core data collection methods. It also involved data triangulation which required me to continuously compare and cross-check the consistency of information derived at different times and by different means.<sup>32</sup> The process of data analysis was inductive as it involved interpreting the material and deriving themes, concepts, theories, and understandings to comprehensively explain the data.<sup>33</sup> Thematic coding was used to analyse the qualitative material, alongside transcription which helped to understand the data collected in interviews. During data analysis, I used several markers of identity such as religion, gender, and sexual orientation to categorise readers. However, I realised that such markers by themselves were insufficient for my purposes because they failed to include a vital aspect of what shapes a readerprint, which was personality. To this end, my coding of British South-Asian Muslimahs also involved associating each participant with one or more personality ‘types’, loosely defined as follows:

- 1) **The Objectivist** – A reader who generally aims to disregard their own cultural background whilst reading Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.
- 2) **The Cultural Accommodator** – A reader who reads the poem through the lens of their own cultural orientation and beliefs, but who allows for the inevitable differences that arise between their own personal stance and the seventeenth-century English Christian culture in which the poem was originally produced.

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<sup>32</sup> Patton, p. 1195.

<sup>33</sup> Cohen et al., p. 645.



- 3) **The Contrarian** – A reader who presents as having contrary and opposing views to others when reading *Paradise Lost*. For this reader, opinions may change depending on others who are involved in the conversation.
- 4) **The Conformist** – A reader whose interpretation of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is heavily and continually influenced by their own religious identification and beliefs, prompting the poem to be read in this light.

It is important to note that I do not suggest that these personality ‘types’ or categories define a participant. Instead, they are (often subtle) traits, which I observed correlated with certain ways of reading *Paradise Lost*. My techniques of using coding and transcription are outlined below.

### **Coding**

Coding is the process of breaking down segments of textual data into smaller units and then examining, comparing, conceptualising, and categorising the data.<sup>34</sup> My multi-method approach meant that I had collected a large amount of qualitative data. Coding, therefore, was a useful practice that helped me to systematically categorise that information. I regularly used Qualtrics software to add visualisation and filter responses. Coding was not always a straightforward process as open-ended questions were often difficult to code, classify, and analyse.<sup>35</sup> To make the best sense of my questionnaire data, I first read them without any identifying markers of participants, and then re-read them in their entirety. This mechanism helped to reduce bias on my part and give me a thorough understanding of the meaning in the material. Afterward, I used manual thematic coding to categorise the qualitative data sets into

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<sup>34</sup> Cohen et al., p. 669.

<sup>35</sup> Cohen et al., p. 476.

smaller samples. This helped to order information, create links, and map out differences. I coded each set of findings gathered from questionnaires and interviews separately before cross-referencing any patterns and themes. When determining personality groups, I cross-referenced the participant's questionnaire response with their interview transcript which helped to inform my view. I then compared all responses and assigned groups accordingly. Thematic coding was also used to break down tutor interviews into smaller units to make the content easier to conceptualise and examine.

### **Transcription**

All interviews were recorded for the purposes of transcription. Participants were made aware of this before the interviews began. The transcriptions permitted me to reflect on how the interviews went and to improve my techniques, but more importantly, they enabled me to provide direct quotations of exactly what was said. Within the transcripts, I included non-verbal sounds such as laughter, sighs, and interruptions using square brackets. There were some instances of slight disturbances caused by the physical or online environment in which the interviews were carried out. These unfortunately resulted in some partially inaudible segments of the recordings. Despite this, I did not feel that this affected the overall transcription. I was still able to reflect on the words, speech, and thought patterns of the respondents. Aside from the redaction of names and specific content upon the request of participants, the transcripts remain otherwise unedited.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study was granted full ethical approval by the University of Birmingham's Humanities and Social Sciences Ethical Review Committee (see [Appendix A](#)). To gain access to participants from other higher educational institutions, I had also to contact each external

university's relevant ethics department and seek further approval. This was a lengthy but necessary process that allowed me to contact potential participants for the reception-study. Unfortunately, even after gaining ethical approval from each external higher educational institution, on some occasions there were leadership figures including Heads of Department who denied my request to be allowed to recruit student participants. This meant that I was not permitted to go any further and could not advertise a call for participants at their institutions.

In institutions where I was permitted to conduct my research, I contacted the relevant members of staff who had access to students studying Milton. The actions that followed varied depending on how the module tutors thought it best to recruit. In some cases, this meant visiting the universities in question and advertising my study during their most popular lectures and Milton seminars. In others, it meant personally contacting students via email, or their tutor contacting them on my behalf. The best results were when I visited in person or sent individual invitations via email. I also advertised my call for participants through online conferences and social media platforms including Twitter. In a small number of cases, academics kindly put me directly in touch with potential participants whom they knew were interested in taking part in the study.

All participants were informed about the nature of the study and of their right to withdraw through the Participant Information Guide and Data Protection notice (see [Appendix B](#)). Upon selecting the Qualtrics questionnaire, participants were reminded of this key information and electronically gave their consent (see [Appendix E](#)). It was clearly stated in the consent form that though their data was not anonymous, it would be treated as strictly confidential. When preparing to interview tutors, they were also given the Consent Form (see [Appendix C](#)) and Supporting Documentation, which included the Participant Information Guide and Data Protection notice (see [Appendix B](#)). Tutors' consent was gained before conducting interviews. All data and information were secured in the data collection software

Qualtrics, which only I had access to; and a password-protected storage device to ensure there were no breaches in confidentiality.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of the research methods that I chose to use were addressed and reconciled where possible through methodological and data triangulation. The findings of this research are strictly limited to the views and opinions shared by the participants in this study. They do not represent or account for the wider views of participants' institutions or their intersectional communities and cannot be generalised. Another crucial element to note is that I had limited access to potential participants during recruitment procedures. This affected the study and made the overall sample size smaller than originally planned. I did not anticipate research being disrupted by institutional gatekeeping, where some leadership figures did not allow me to advertise the study or gain access to their students despite gaining full ethical approval. This was deeply disappointing since these institutions had high proportions of BAME students and would have likely increased my sample of British South-Asian Muslimahs.

As explained above, unforeseen events such as industrial strike action and the COVID-19 pandemic also caused significant disruption and impinged on my research activity. During these periods, it became extremely difficult to liaise with institutions which slowed the overall process and eliminated any chance of conducting focus groups and reading journals. This was unfortunate as these additional methods would have provided a further tranche of information on individual reading habits and responses to *Paradise Lost* over a sustained period. On several occasions, my plan to target students on specific modules involving *Paradise Lost* could not go ahead as courses were overhauled or postponed due to changes in teaching practices during these unprecedented times. This too affected my overall number of participants. Restrictions caused by the global pandemic made it challenging to

recruit participants and conduct interviews in-person. Attempting to mitigate these challenges, I moved to using online methods of communication and data collection. This transition was not always simple as online methods of data collection presented their own set of challenges. For instance, one interview was conducted with a tutor who was recovering from COVID-19, and another with a tutor who chose to wear a mask to protect those around her. In both cases, I was attentive to their needs and offered to postpone. However, time constraints on their part meant that they still wanted to go ahead. I strove to keep the first interview as brief as possible, and for the second, settled on relying on verbal utterances and did not place too much emphasis on non-verbal cues. Though this meant that their data sets were perhaps not as comprehensive as others, I considered the compromises necessary given the circumstances.

## **Part 2: Reader Responses to *Paradise Lost***

## God the Father

Faith or disbelief in God is something some choose to wear on their sleeves, while for others it is a quiet and private understanding. Regardless of which way we lean, the relationship readers possess with God in their own lives undoubtedly shapes their encounters with Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Central to the poem is, of course, the poet's ambition to 'justify the ways of God to men'<sup>1</sup> (Book I: 26), which invites one on a journey to understand the logic of the Divine. It is difficult to imagine a reader undergoing this process of understanding without applying their own thoughts and beliefs to the equation. While some critics including C. S. Lewis and Samuel Taylor Coleridge perceive God favourably in the poem;<sup>2</sup> others are not so convinced. Arthur Waldock, for example, believed that the poet fails in his stated aim to justify God,<sup>3</sup> while William Empson, who considered himself an atheist, declared that 'the reason why the poem is so good is that it makes God so bad'.<sup>4</sup> Commenting on the critical tradition, John Leonard describes the historic debate on God the Father as 'triangular', explaining that traditionally, there have been three dominant lines of argument: 1) critics who believe that Milton succeeds in justifying God and therefore applaud the poem (these are devout believers, for the most part); 2) those who think Milton fails in his ambition and therefore deplore the poem (either non-believers or believers who take offence at Milton's beliefs); 3) those who share Empson's view and are readers who love to hate God (usually atheists who are grateful to Milton for exposing God's dark side).<sup>5</sup> From Leonard's conclusions, it is clear then, that historically, a reader's religious framework has indeed had a

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<sup>1</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. by Alastair Fowler, 2nd edn (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), p. 60. All future citations will be from this edition.

<sup>2</sup> C. S., Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Coleridge's 'wholehearted defence' of Milton's God the Father is available in John Leonard, *Faithful Labourers: A Reception History of 'Paradise Lost', 1667-1970: Volume II: Interpretive Issues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 493.

<sup>3</sup> John Leonard, *Faithful Labourers: A Reception History of 'Paradise Lost', 1667-1970: Volume II: Interpretive Issues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), , p. 478.

<sup>4</sup> William Empson, *Milton's God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> Leonard, p, 477.

significant influence on interpretations of God the Father, which has in turn, coloured attitudes towards the poem more generally as a whole. In defence of Milton's God, Anthony Low argued in the 1970s that a disconnect with the character is not an issue of religion, but rather, it is due to changing socio-cultural dynamics which produced a 'bias in the modern reader'. Low explains that for both critics and the 'common reader', the root of the difficulty is that they are 'simply and obviously' predisposed to dislike authority in all forms:

Even those readers who are over thirty are repelled by absolute authority, authority unqualified and uncompromising - no matter if it is absolutely 'just' or 'good' at the same time. As a result, they are unable to look at Milton's God and to see him as he really is in the poem; to read his speeches and to feel them as poetry; in short, to make that adjustment of self which is necessary to the reception of any work of art.<sup>6</sup>

For Low, who thinks favourably of Milton's God, negative attitudes towards authority are seen as a hinderance when it comes to appreciating the poem in a manner he deems correct. Though the critic's remarks are highly generalised and undoubtedly an oversimplification of how modern minds operate, the 'adjustment of self' that Low refers to suggests that readers should extend their imaginative sympathy and suspend judgement when engaging with material that they do not favour or recognise. I do not ascribe myself to the view that a reader's identity and/or belief system are inhibiting factors, but rather, see them as tools that allow for unique and rich understandings. This paves way to allow for new insight from the reading experiences of minority groups from non-traditionalist or different faith backgrounds. To this end, this study offers a more flexible approach to understanding responses towards God the Father, arguing that a reader brings both their identity *and* their critical faculties to

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<sup>6</sup> Anthony Low, 'Milton's God: Authority in Paradise Lost', *Milton Studies*, 4.1, (1972), 19-38 (19-21).



bear when reading. As such, I argue that interpretations are not shaped *entirely* by a reader's background, but also by an interaction with the reader's critical appraisal of the literary work in its historical and religious context as well as its own cultural frame of reference. With these considerations in mind, this chapter will illuminate how Milton's characterisation of God the Father prompts varying responses in readers in accordance with their social, cultural, and religious backgrounds; and will explore how these interpretations are reconciled with their thoughts on Milton's God and the poem on a whole.

When examining responses, it quickly became evident that the majority of readers felt negative or indifferent towards Milton's portrait of God the Father. In most of these instances, the part played by the individual identities of readers was clear as their personal beliefs came to dominate and heavily influence their readerprints – which refers to the way in which a reader's interpretative response is influenced by facets of their intersectional identity. Interestingly, respondents were often aware of such influences and were forthcoming in making these connections clear. For several of these participants, a failure to connect with Milton's God was reported:

*I felt that "God the Father" was a distant character. I wouldn't say I could not understand the reason behind his role and actions in the structure of the poem but he did not resonate with me in any real way. I think he was meant to be depicted both as a ruler and a father but I don't remember any particular warmth in him.*

- Catherine

Christian reader Catherine admits to having “struggled a lot” with distinguishing between Milton's characterisation of God the Father and her perception of what that characterisation should have looked like. Desperately wanting to read *Paradise Lost* as “just a story”,

Catherine reflects that she failed to do so as her subconscious reactions to the text were rooted in what she believes in. Alongside these personal beliefs, the Christian reader shared that her thoughts were also clearly influenced by her Catholic education.

*It's a completely different story from the versions of Genesis I knew and it doesn't matter how much you think you know about a certain thing, it is interesting to know a new perspective, especially if it is different from yours.*

- Catherine

Brian, a lapsed Christian respondent reported to feel disconnected and “unmoved” by God in the poem. He explained that this remained the same throughout his reading experience and “had nothing to do with any positive or negative feelings toward the character, he just felt distant”. When describing God the Father, the word “distant” was used numerous times by participants including Clara who wrote:

*Initially I think God the Father is presented as powerful, and as the perfect protagonist to Satan's antagonist. I think the description of the Creation story, for me, is a testament to his power, and this attracts me to the character, as does the description of his expelling of the fallen angels from Heaven. At times though, the character appears to be more removed, more distant - almost a background figure, and as the poem progresses Satan somewhat overshadows him. I think that in contrast to some of the angels - Michael, for example, God seems somewhat less impressive at times.*

- Clara

While God the Father's perceived "distance" evoked feelings of disappointment in Catherine and indifference in Brian; for Clara, the character initially sparked admiration in the lapsed Christian reader, but later became less impressive when paralleled with other angelic creatures. Critic Marianna Woodhall also holds this view, stating that Milton's 'gallant attempt' to portray God was an 'impossible undertaking' that ultimately 'stiffened his style' as his speeches were lacking in 'beauty and dignity'.<sup>7</sup> In line with this argument, Sharon, who identifies as an atheist wrote:

*I found God to be presented as a very removed, authoritative and at times dislikable [sic.] character. The challenges and resistance Milton experienced in reluctantly anthropomorphizing this powerful being into a character that readers could understand interested me. God the Father is not a character that stays with me, I think it's largely because I found his speeches to be far less evocative than for example Satan's, or even some of the angels.*

- Sharon

Like many lapsed Christian and atheist respondents in the study, Sharon blamed God the Father for the Fall after struggling to comprehend the logic of the divine and the concept of free will:

*God the Father seems responsible because even though he claims that his foreknowledge does not necessitate that the future will occur, he could have stopped*

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<sup>7</sup> Marianna, Woodhall, 'The Epic of Paradise Lost; Twelve Essays' (Putnam's Sons: New York, 1907) pp. 257-260).

*the fall if he wished, or prevented it from being a possibility in the first place. He saw it necessary for mankind, so he allowed it, therefore he is partially responsible.*

- Sharon

By contrast, however, the Muslimah participants did not demonstrate the same concern and displayed no trouble in understanding God's logic. Instead, where negative criticism existed, the Muslimah readers seemed to be more focussed on and displeased by the fact that Milton portrays God in poetry at all, rather than displeased by God's logic about divine justice. It is important to note that in Islam, it is strictly prohibited to portray God or assign any words to Him that He has not stated. Therefore, God the Father's anthropomorphic portrayal in *Paradise Lost* is a deviation from what a Muslim reader is accustomed to in their own religious practices. Islam Issa notes that for most readers, God the Father is a complex and controversial character; but for Muslim readers, this is even more pronounced. Issa goes on further to explain that because Muslim readers bring numerous theological and cultural beliefs about God's pre-eminence to the reading process, they are likely to regard Milton's depiction of the Father more positively than is often the case in non-Muslim readings of the poem.<sup>8</sup> This was certainly the case in this study as even when the figure of God the Father was critiqued, the majority of Muslimah readers still made an effort to rationalise his behaviour:

*His representation is quite flat, and he is removed from the action. There is a mystery that shrouds him and the moments in which he does speak, it lacks any eloquence or poetics (unlike Satan). He is presented as cold and quite aloof, yet arguably this allows his 'justice' to take place without being swayed by emotion.*

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<sup>8</sup> Islam Issa, *Milton in the Arab Muslim World* (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 165-166.

- Zainab

Like Sharon, comparisons between God the Father and Satan's speeches were also made by Zainab. However, though the British-Pakistani Muslimah was unimpressed by the character's lack of centrality and perceived God the Father as distant in the poem, she could still see that Milton might have had a good reason to present God the Father in this way. When further reflecting on her characterisation, Zainab shared her personal views on the differences between God in her Islamic understanding with Milton's depiction of the Father. The Shia Muslimah revealed that "there is no trinity in Islamic theology, it is simply God", meaning that "God fulfilled the roles assigned to others in this text" (referring to the Son). A lack of centrality on God the Father's part, therefore, was unfamiliar to Zainab who was accustomed to a God of action. The British-Pakistani reader stated that her God "is not distant or cold but contrastingly merciful and forgiving". Zainab was not alone in comparing divine figures in the Miltonic and Islamic traditions. For British-Indian participant Manal, who I categorise as a 'cultural accommodator', parallels were made between both deities in a similar fashion:

*I believe the character of God was not particularly developed within the poem. - God seems uninvolved with creation - There are not many encounters between God and His creation - he is a transcendent God. This reminded of the concept of tanzih in Sufism. - The more I read the poem, the more I felt God was a standoffish character, although he embodied justice/ -Perhaps in portraying this majestic God who is uninvolved and unrelatable, Milton is emphasising God's majesty?*

- Manal

Despite God the Father being labelled as a “standoffish character”, Manal found a way to conceptualise his cold and distant depiction by reconciling this image with Islamic theology. In Sufi thought, the concept of Tanzih is a fundamental part of creed on God, which emphasises God’s transcendence as He is understood to have no likeness with creation as “There is nothing like Him” (Qur’an 42:11).<sup>9</sup> This concept is an expression of apophatic theology (also known as negative theology) which is found in many religious traditions and expresses that God is known by negating concepts that might be applied to Him, stressing the inadequacy of human language and concepts used to describe Him.<sup>10</sup> Using this theological analogy, the British-Indian Muslimah alludes to the notion that God the Father is purposely presented above creation, both in action and reason. As the Father’s divine and “majestic” figure is incomparable with others, he therefore transcends full comprehension. In this case, Manal is an example of how a non-traditionalist reader utilised her Muslim identity to enhance her interpretation of Milton’s God.

In another instance, a similar conclusion was reached by Natasha:

*I felt unmoved by God the Father's character in Paradise Lost. For the supposed centrality of his character in the poem with Milton's aim to 'justify the ways of God to men', to reinforce his greatness. It didn't feel as powerful. It's difficult to try and touch upon exactly what it is about this representation of God that made me feel this way. I think that it was that his character remained almost untouched. Other characters- Satan, Adam and Eve were much more elaborated on, there was a greater depth to them. Yet thinking about it more, this representation also makes sense in that Milton's*

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Sufi’ – is a term used to refer to one of a sect of Muslim ascetic mystics who in later times embraced pantheistic views. See ‘Sufi, in *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online]. The concept of Tanzih is explored in more detail here: Mustafa, Shah (2018) ‘Tanzih and Tashbih in Classical Islamic Thought.’ Oxford Bibliographies on line, 1 (1). 1-30.

<sup>10</sup> Piotr Urbańczyk, ‘The Logical Challenge of Negative Theology’, *Studies in Logic, Grammar and Rhetoric*, 54.1, (2018), 149-174 (150).

*aim is to reinforce God's complete Omnipotence, he is the highest degree of Divinity and power. So, whilst I didn't particularly like God the Father in Paradise Lost, I suppose that that feeling of distance or detachment is inevitable. We aren't supposed to sympathise with him in the way we might with Adam and Eve or even (uncomfortably so) at times with Satan because he is the greatest and most powerful, existing above humans in every way.*

- Natasha

God the Father caused disappointment in this Christian reader who felt deflated by the character's distance and detachment in the poem. Like Manal, this took Natasha by surprise as she eventually reached an understanding that this was a purposeful poetic decision. It is worth mentioning that unlike critics who had historically deplored the poem for failing to "justify the ways of God to men" (Book I: 26), the same reaction was not registered here. While Natasha could not help but feel unfulfilled by God the Father's portrayal, the Christian reader nonetheless praised *Paradise Lost* for its ability to challenge and provoke thought more than any other text she has encountered.

The poem was admired by Sannah for its "unique and epic depiction of a universally-recognised Abrahamic narrative". This British-Pakistani Muslimah reader, who I deem a 'cultural accommodator', shared that her Islamic beliefs influenced the way she understood and approached characters in the epic, which in turn, had an impact on her initial acceptance or rejection of them. With that being the case, after careful consideration on God the Father, Sannah described him as:

*The originator of all things good and evil, the orchestrator of tragic falls and the final giver of Christian judgement, God the Father is depicted as possessing power early*

*on in Paradise Lost, mainly through his omniscience throughout the poem. However, the more his character features alongside the growing, rebellious natures of Adam and Eve and the deceitful entry of Satan into Heaven, God the Father's character grows weaker in comparison. His physical show of power decreases as his temperament expresses tyranny, and an anger and vengeance akin to that of his fallen angel, Satan.*

- Sannah

Sannah perceived God the Father's presence in the poem to weaken as the narrative progressed. She selected contrasting words to describe the figure such as "powerful", "superior", "inferior", "cruel", "tyrant" and "unsympathetic" which reflect this trajectory. Her tendency to read the poem through the lens of her own cultural orientation and beliefs still allowed for the inevitable differences between her own stance, and the poem's original context. Sannah's practice of mediating between the two differing frameworks thus allowed both structures to coexist in her readerprint. The Muslimah reader was aware of this and shared that the deeper she delved into the poem, the more she interacted with the plot, and tried to review the characters through a literary, contextual and narrative lens more than a religious one. Despite this being the case, during our interview exchange, Sannah admitted to feeling unsettled and troubled by the fact that she could not relate, identify, or side with the character of God. Nonetheless, this did not deter her from appreciating the poetic work and valuing the emotional rollercoaster she experienced whilst reading.

The poem's capacity to cause deep introspection through God the Father's character was also evident in Riya's reading experience who held the view that Milton's depiction was distant, yet purposeful:



*It is was first hard for me to differentiate between God as a representative figure of religious doctrine and God as a character in Paradise Lost and it is only on the subsequent rereads after that I was able to separate the two identities. God is portrayed as quite a cold character; his actions seem calculated and he operates on the knowledge of future events and inflicts harsher judgement because if [sic. of] it. My first impression of God was that this is a God that I cannot question. I was accepting of his actions, his speech and his mannerisms to the point where I was passively accepting this character and not really engaging or questioning his actions and responses. My second read I was heavily influenced by many harsh critiques on the character of God, and I agreed heavily simply because they displayed their argument quite well and is true. God is unsympathetic. He is a character that is removed from the characters that are central in the role of the fall of Man. But he fails to actually interact with them, his speech is focused, unemotional and to a point, stoic. The God in my second read of Paradise Lost was someone who I was extremely unattached to, but one I was intensely engaged with and applying a negative bias on my reading and interpretation of God as a character. However, on my 4th reread of Paradise lost, my view of God completely switched to some one that encompasses my first and second interpretation. I firmly believe that God is written like this intentionally simply because he is God, his speech and actions must also therefore, reflect that. He is not emotional like Adam and Eve, referential like the angels nor is he manipulative like Lucifer. Instead, his being is far too omniscient for him to have a warm, sympathetic and even loving mannerisms and speech. God is represented unsympathetic simply because he transcends the narrative and the box in which humanism [sic. human] emotions and empathy can be contained in. Because of this I began to judge his actions less harshly and begin to view Gods actions in the eye of*

*someone who holds the answers of the future and thus he becomes a God that is loving, simply because he does not influence his knowledge upon Adam and Eve, he refrains from much contact and lets them make their own choice. Overall, I became much more sympathetic to God's character as a whole as I began to judge his actions more closely and without any bias of previous critical interpretations.*

- Riya

As reflected above, for this British-Pakistani Muslimah who I categorise as 'the contrarian', it was a gradual and progressive journey that eventually allowed her to reach this informed conclusion. To get there, Riya spoke of ridding her mind of what other critics had previously argued so that she may independently form her own opinion. This indicates the weight of external influences including existing literary criticism which undoubtedly impacts a student or scholarly reader's interpretation in its own way. Like fellow Muslimah Manal, Riya also recognised God the Father's transcendence and distinction from all other beings.

Interestingly, during our in-person interview, Riya shared that she believed her age was a factor that allowed a more mature outlook in comparison to her peers who conversely perceived Milton's God the Father as cold. The 26-year-old also revealed that culturally, she considered it taboo to "talk about God in a bad way", which due to its "strict, rigid structure", meant that it was extremely difficult for her to freely discuss her own opinions on the matter. This framework in her own life is perhaps what encouraged her to make such a vigorous effort to understand and explain her experience of reading God in *Paradise Lost*.

Alternatively, there were others in the study who regarded God the Father as tyrannical:

*Milton situates God as a tyrant, or, in less inflammatory terms, the unknowable and unaccountable force behind Man's development. The source of discontent among both Man and the Lesser Angels. I think this is important. God's plan/will needs explaining whereas those who defy the arbitrary orders are sympathetic.*

- Ashton

Ashton, a 34-year-old American male, held God solely responsible for the Fall as he set “rules which counter the nature of his creation”. The atheist respondent states that though he grew up in a country with strong Judeo-Christian cultural interpretations, he does not have strong moralistic feelings about those ideals. Like Riya, Ashton also commented on age being an important determiner, and stressed that *Paradise Lost* is a work “that needs to be read at the right time in one's life” as “young students ([aged] 16-20) may not fully appreciate the nuance of the meanings, the beauty of the lyricism, or the difficulty of the form in their first reading and may be put off”. Sharing similarities with Empson’s perception, though Ashton was not attracted to God’s character, Milton’s portrayal aligned with his own notion of God, allowing him to recognise the work as “one of the most beautiful pieces of writing committed to paper”.

Correspondingly, a participant who identified themselves as an atheist was Gwen who likewise considered the Father tyrannical. She was:

*Unsympathetic towards the character from when he all but forces the son to agree to sacrifice himself for mankind. This unsympathetic response gets worse as he becomes more tyrannical in his punishment of man. I think part of this is because I do not have the religious upbringing that allows me to see the idea of God's plan and being tested for your own good that I suppose was intended.*

- Gwen

Noting the impact of her own non-religious and cultural formation, Gwen recognises that her issue with God the Father is less to do with the poem, and more so directed at her opposition to organised religion in general. She explains that she finds the concept of an “all-powerful being who can decide what happens to you” and subsequently “punish you for choices you freely make” highly problematic. Acknowledging this imbalance, Gwen admits:

*My feelings about organised religion mean that I cannot see God the Father in the way that I am sure Milton intended. Without having the basis of faith that God leads you down the right path and rewards you in heaven, I don't think it's possible to fully appreciate the character of God the Father in the intended way.*

- Gwen

Although this aversion existed for the atheist reader, Gwen insisted that *Paradise Lost* was her “all-time favourite piece of literature” and was adamant that the work should be a mandatory reading for everyone. This feeling was shared by Jack who deeply valued the poem, but also exhibited feelings of hatred towards the Father:

*At the start my response was that of quite sincere loathing and I viewed him very much as tyrannical. The whole concept behind his plan is made problematic by the fact he had foreknowledge to all of this. But when justification is said in Book 3 I did start to understand why he took the steps he did. It didn't make me like him but it did render him slightly less tyrannical. I enjoy the ideas of anti-establishment so I was*

*never going to align entirely with God in the text as he is a symbol of the establishment!*

- Jack

Alongside his non-religious background, Jack believed that his upbringing in a “very white middle-working class social environment” entirely coloured his readerprint as he read the poem with post-modern and Marxist theories in mind. As a result, in protest, Jack found himself relating to and favouring the character of Satan. Anti-establishment ideals were further expressed in Jane’s response as she too vilified God the Father:

*I have always felt unsympathetic towards the character of God the Father. This probably has several reasons. I was introduced to Paradise Lost at my A Levels and viewed the character of Satan through a Byronic lens; to me Satan was the heroic figure and his punisher therefore had to be cruel and tyrannical. God’s lines are unremarkable in comparison to Satan’s, and Satan is so compelling, revolutionarily, and Miltonic in his criticism of the tyranny of heaven. Another reason is the impossibility of the task: how could Milton ‘justify the ways of God to man’ when the ways of God in the story are cruel and arbitrary (in the sense of creating this elaborate world he knew would fall)? God knew of the inevitability of the fall of the angels and then the fall of man before it ever occurred. This prompts new questions about the figure of God. If he knew all would fall and would be tortured everlasting, can he be viewed as omnibenevolent? If he didn’t know, is he omniscient? As an atheist I don’t struggle with these conundrums as I see the mission impossible of ‘justifying’ the ways of an inherently cruel and dogmatic God figure in a non-religious, impersonal light. Perhaps one of the reasons I love this text so much is that*

*is does seem to critique the figure of God which I think is an extremely healthy thing for Christianity.*

- Jane

Jane's rich account echoes the arguments of the Romantics, which she herself was aware of. Continuing the discussion in our interview, the 25-year-old confessed to having always struggled with issues of predeterminism which heightened her problem in understanding the logic of God. Instead, in *Paradise Lost*, Jane saw a "revolutionary text" which tied into the way she viewed the world. Reflecting on her background, Jane explained:

Jane: I came to it from a very atheistic, even anti-religious background, and I guess there's always an element of confirmation bias and how you approach a text. Like, my mum, she's not anti-religious but my dad was. My mum was, is, very anti-monarchist so she's very Republican, so in the figure of God, I could find a lot of things that I'd been brought up thinking, or invited to think about like tyranny, monarchy, you know, a sort of vengeful God figure who is destructive and I was taught to be very questioning of religion. So, my background, I found, gave me access to it but then again, I'm sure that your background does affect some of the ways that you think about a text, or how you approach it, or the kind of questions you're interested in within it... but I couldn't say if it was a good or a bad thing.

-Excerpt from interview with Jane

For Jane, then, her socio-cultural and non-religious formation naturally, and unavoidably had an obvious impact when it came to her reading of seminal figures such as God the Father. In

comparison to descriptions of his perceived tyranny, others, namely from Christian backgrounds, dismissed this characterisation:

*It is common for people to see God the Father, especially in the Old Testament and also reflected in Paradise Lost as a tyrant. Whilst this isn't my belief, I can appreciate why the view would be that way if His character was taken out of context. Paradise Lost sides with Satan and follows his story of rejection but what the story doesn't cover is God's hatred of harmful sin that justifies his wrath. I appreciate Paradise Lost as a work of fiction however and like the other angle that it provides (as long as one does not replace the scriptures with the same sympathy for the Devil).*

- Judy

Judy stressed her personal belief in a “good God” and stated that “no depiction of him as a tyrant could change that view”. In view of this judgement, the Christian reader revealed that it deeply saddened her when people weaponised the text to “justify their atheism”. Judy emphasised that as long as readers remember that the poem was written by a “mortal man” and is a work of fiction, it should not be problematic. She warned:

*If you constantly view literature through post-modern lenses of gender oppression, looking for the victim and oppressor in every text, you can miss a great deal of other themes and interpretations.*

- Judy

Clearly, Judy's defensive view of the poem, and of those who criticise its depiction of God, are deeply informed by her Christian beliefs. Criticising Milton's God the Father, Christian respondent Joseph thought the depiction was not tyrannical, but rather dull:

*I am largely unmoved by Milton's depiction of God the Father. He is largely stuck with these long theological speeches which don't bring out a lot of character. But then characterising God the Father is not easy! His flashes of anger ('ingrate!') or compassion seem to come out of nowhere. Unlike many, I have never felt that He is a tyrant or abominably evil. Milton's real fault in the depiction is that his God the Father is so dull. I was always raised to believe in a very loving God and have continued to do so. I am aware many have a more judgemental or harsh image of God which they may put onto Milton's and I can understand that. But really, He's simply not that interesting in Milton's work.*

- Joseph

Joseph perceived God to be lacking in oratory skill and cited the same reasons as many others for disliking the character's representation. Interestingly however, this did not deter the Christian reader in distinguishing himself a member of "God's party". Joseph shared that he reads the poem through a "traditional Christian framework", explaining that Milton would have had to alter the narrative "quite radically" for him to think the Fall was fortunate in any way. When it comes to understanding humanity, Joseph revealed that he takes the idea of the Fall very seriously and does not treat it as something of little consequence. This contrasts with the Jewish reader Miriyam who was disturbed by the depiction of God the Father:



*I was rather unmoved towards the character. I found his role in the text very manipulative, as he was presented as omniscient and was expecting for Satan to tempt Eve so the human race could fall. I found this further supported by Eve being described as Pandora from the classic Greek fable, suggesting the human race was made to fall and thus Satan had to have fallen as well in order for this ark of true understanding and choice to serve God the Father to continue. This made me suspicious that God damned Satan for his own selfish agenda and perhaps he is a form of dictator which Satan wanted to overthrow to create a council, demonstrating democracy (as seen in Book 2). Overall, I was not sympathetic towards God the Father in the slightest.*

- Miriyam

Coming from a Jewish background, Miriyam states that she would cautiously only recommend the poem to others depending on how open their minds are as it can cause “troubling thoughts” regarding your own faith. By contrast, Ansar, a British-Kashmiri Muslimah participant initially appeared to be less troubled in her questionnaire response:

*I appreciated how he was a defender of free will and let evil happen but ensured good came out of evil. I liked the character as he was always just and works with reason.*

- Ansar

Intriguingly however, during the interview, Ansar revealed that she “would not have wanted God to be portrayed in the way that He was”. The Muslimah revealed that she experienced some level of discomfort when figures including God the Father were discussed in seminars:

Eva: What did you most enjoy in the seminar?

Ansar: I think those discussions, and seeing how people's mindsets, opinions, and people's views came out when discussing certain things. So you can see whether there was an inclination towards certain things.

Eva: What did you least enjoy? And why?

Ansar: I think the same thing. Because, it can have two sides. I think, because it's a religious text, and because some people are from a religious background, they might feel as though the book is being attacked. Because of the religious standing. And whether you are part of that religion or not, it's still... it can feel like it's getting very personal sometimes. Even though I'm not a Christian, if certain characters are being... discussed and disagreement was upon them, whether it was God, or Adam... it still gets personal if that makes sense, because it's a shared narrative and many aspects are the same in these religions.

Eva: Would you encourage the poem to be read in multicultural settings?

Ansar: I think so, yes. Because I think people's backgrounds bring... it's good for healthy discussion, I think. They have a different take on it and you can discuss more about different people's narratives. It opens up a dialogue, doesn't it?

-Excerpt from interview with Ansar

For this Muslim reader then, although she does not share her faith with Milton, *Paradise Lost* discusses figures that are also in the Islamic story of creation, leading Ansar to feel a sense of ownership and protectiveness over characters including God. This could perhaps account for why Ansar was reluctant in critiquing the figure in the same manner as her peers. Instead, the British-Kashmiri reader chose to concentrate on the good, which was a characteristic she shared with other Muslimah respondents including Hana:

*Although I do not take God as the father or believe in any aspect of the holy trinity, I find that Paradise Lost preserves some characteristics of God. He is powerful, knowing, and allows his creatures to have freewill.*

- Hana

After a polite disclaimer given by Hana, a British-Bangladeshi Muslimah, God the Father was also described in predominantly positive terms. However, akin to Ansar, ‘the cultural accommodator’ later revealed some stark differences between Milton’s God, and her belief in Allah. She explained that *Paradise Lost* “does not align to [*sic.* with] the teaching of the Qur’an at all” as “God is not evil”. During our in-person interview, Hana revealed why:

Hana: I think God is depicted as really vengeful and an angry person [in *Paradise Lost*]. That counteracts with what is said in the Qur’an about God being merciful and forgiving, although He does have angry traits. Like in the Qur’an, as soon as you have things like oh God is... you know, you’ll be punished for what you do. Or God is... what I’m trying to get at is, in every sort of line in the Qur’an, in every line, as soon it says that you will be punished for what you do...

Eva: Ah, the reward is stated straight after.

Hana: Yeah! The reward comes right after. It says things like, oh, but for the people that do good, there are eternal heavens or something. And I think that that is something *Paradise Lost* doesn't really get at.

Eva: That's really interesting.

Hana: But I think we need to remember that it isn't a Biblical text for it to do that.

-Excerpt from interview with Hana

The position of being a female Muslim interviewer was helpful in this instance as I knew exactly what she was referring to. Later, Hana's reminder that Milton's poem was merely an adaptation of Genesis explains why she took the figure in stride. Interestingly, this was a view that was also upheld by all other Muslimah respondents in this study. Notably, in comparison to Ansar, discomfort was not experienced by Hana, yet the British-Bangladeshi reader's belief in Islam was a framework that also certainly coloured her view of Milton's God.

Elsewhere, God the Father's presentation gave rise to an interesting observation made by Christian participant Timothy who described him as "disingenuous", but also claimed to enjoy the character's "moral dubiousness and suspect logic":

*I find God the Father in Book 11 rather disingenuous. He tells the Son that there was no way that he could have prevented Adam and Eve being ejected from Paradise because, once they tasted the Forbidden Fruit, there was no way of preventing Nature*

*from rejecting Adam and Eve. Especially after the Son's appeal to the Father for mercy, asking Him to 'bend [his] ear / To supplication', I find that the way Milton has the Father respond with the argument that it was, essentially, out of hands, a very tongue-in-cheek comment. I feel this because it seems to conflict with his Omnipotence, but the Father is coy here about whether he believes Adam and Eve deserve to be rejected. The Father doesn't give His response to Adam and Eve's desperate prayers since Nature just won't allow it: 'those pure immortal elements that know / No gross, no unharmonious mixture foul, / Eject him tainted now, and purge him off'. So, I suppose that I don't like the Father's response to the Son's plea to listen to Adam and Eve's supplication because it's so impersonal; the Father's response here is like reading the small-print in a contract. Indeed, it's a rejoinder that's worthy of Milton's Satan's superb sophistry and his art of wriggling his way through crafty responses and rhetoric. But this moral dubiousness and suspect logic is also one of great appeals of the Father for me.*

- Timothy

Importantly, doctoral researcher Timothy stated that when reading the poet's work, he does not engage with it on religious grounds, "but primarily for its stunning language and for Milton's place in Renaissance and Early Modern literature". The Christian reader did not think that his spiritual background gave him a "silver bullet" for understanding the poem and thus claimed to always approach Milton "with a literary view in mind". Differently, atheist respondent Shauna believed that her lack of religion tempers her reading of *Paradise Lost* because she is "more likely to analyse it in a more cynical way than people who do have religious beliefs". On God the Father, she was:

*Relatively unmoved by his character. If anything he seemed slightly arrogant by the way that he responded to events with the mentality of 'well, I meant for this to happen anyway so it's fine'.*

- Shauna

Unlike Timothy, for British-Biracial Muslimah reader Nusayba, religion is explained to be a major factor when it came to understanding her outlook on God the Father:

*Initially when first reading the poem any mention of God that could be presented in a negative light was something that contradicted my faith. My dissertation was based upon God's relationship with nature and this was one that is ambiguous to a certain degree. However, as my analysis developed I saw a very mutual and equal relationship which presented God in a positive light. One can argue that this was influenced by my beliefs that I had brought to the text in which I had wanted to see God in such a light. This was very much also influenced by Milton's religious background but also my determination in proving that Milton was pro-religion and pro-female.*

- Nusayba

Nusayba's analysis is reminiscent of Jane's earlier observation that readers bring an element of confirmation bias to their readings. For this Muslimah participant, this was something that she was aware of:

Eva: I really loved your analysis of God's character. For instance, there was a bit where you said that you made your cultural and religious upbringing frame your

understanding, so you were more keen to see him in a positive light than a negative one.

Nusayba: Definitely! Definitely. I DEFINITELY did not want him to come across as like a baddie basically. And I guess that's what really really pushed me to that point - that God wasn't a dictator, and he wasn't a figure of patriarchy.

Eva: Do you feel a level of defensiveness?

Nusayba: Definitely, I remember in my dissertation meetings always saying like no! but he's not bad! [laughs] he's not this, he's not that! And I'm always trying to – because it'll always prod you to explore your point more and further it – and you have got to take all sorts of elements into it. Initially – during my whole dissertation I was going back and forth whether God was good or not. Back and forth. And that's literally just one figure that I had to make it make sense. I can argue him being a baddie as well to be honest! [laughs] That's how much I've looked into it but to be honest, my gut feeling and my true perspective of the text is that he's not.

-Excerpt from interview with Nusayba

For this Muslimah reader who I categorise as 'the conformist' due to her orthodox Islamic thinking, it was fascinating to observe her unshakeable confidence and remarkable level of transparency when discussing her reading experience. This could perhaps be attributed to the fact that her supervisor was a senior Muslim academic who took care to listen to her views. Like Ansar, Nusayba also felt defensive of Milton's God due to the similar origin story in the Qur'an. However, she took it a step further by using her own religious formation to actively

inform her understanding of Milton's portrayal. In the end, this resulted in the Muslimah's readerprint to perceive God the Father as a figure that she favours and holds dear.

In conclusion, this investigation into how readers read and understand God the Father in *Paradise Lost* has revealed that their social, cultural, and religious formations almost always colour their readerprints in some way. This study showed that for most respondents, distance, detachment, and dullness in the divine figure of God the Father was detected. For many Christian readers, this created confusion as they failed to connect with him in the manner that they had hoped. A number of respondents who identified themselves as belonging to a religious group stated to have struggled with the Father's depiction as it opposed their own understandings of God. While for others, though God the Father was still favoured, a lack of power in his poetics and oration could not be ignored, leaving them to admire other characters instead. Contrastingly, in the cases of Muslim women, it was found that they regularly compared Milton's God with their own and agreed that he did not align with their knowledge of Islamic tradition. This caused quiet discomfort in one British-Kashmiri Muslimah while the figure was debated in class, but for another British-Bangladeshi Muslimah, the fact that the poem was fictional was a comforting reminder. Moreover, in cases where negative criticism existed, Muslimah readers still made an effort to rationalise his behaviour. For instance, a lack of centrality was reconciled by considering God the Father as a transcendent God – which was something that these readers were more familiar with in their own spiritual traditions. Milton's distant portrayal of the Father was thus understood to be an intentional artistic choice. In contrast, atheist respondents were less sympathetic, and perceived God the Father through lenses of anti-establishment and tyranny. Fascinatingly, overall, participants were mindful of their backgrounds colouring their interpretations in these distinct ways. These outlooks were often embraced, and irrespective of their opinions on the epic's God, *Paradise Lost* remained a text that they remembered for



its greatness. We learn, then, that by valuing and appreciating the opinions of all readers from multi-faith backgrounds, we not only discover how they understand Milton's God, but are also enlightened with new knowledge on how they perceive our world.

## God the Son

In relation to the Son in *Paradise Lost*, critical discourse has laid a heavy emphasis on exploring the theology of Milton through the character's portrayal. This follows the aftermath of the publication of *De Doctrina Christiana* (1825) which adopts an anti-trinitarian stance and is thought to be authored by the poet himself. For the purposes of this thesis, which follows readers' responses to the poem and not critics, most participants do not comment on these theological discussions. Though this study focuses on a different type of reader, it is still useful to briefly review what scholarly discourse has focussed on. Commentaries on the Son have chiefly revolved around the topic of Milton's alleged Arianism. This is fuelled by the intriguing remarks of *De Doctrina Christiana* which have led critics to argue that Milton's representation of the character conforms to anti-trinitarian ideals.<sup>1</sup> For instance, Stopford A. Brooke evidences the Son's portrayal to insist that Milton was a 'deliberate Arian', arguing that the poet did not divide the Father and the Son in *Paradise Lost* for dramatic effect, but rather due to the fact that 'they were two Persons to him'.<sup>2</sup> Complicating this standpoint, Gordon Campbell warns that this view is mistaken as although the poet believes that the Son is not eternal, he does not believe that the figure was created out of nothing but was rather begotten out of the substance of God the Father.<sup>3</sup> These ideological concerns are problematised by Michael Lieb who expresses that it does not make much sense to conclude on the basis of *De Doctrina Christiana* that Milton was an Arian.<sup>4</sup>

Critical works have also had a tendency to make comparisons between the Father and the Son in *Paradise Lost*. This is exemplified in Marilyn Arnold's work as she recognises that the two characters are crafted as purposefully different. Arnold rationalises Milton's

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Kelley, 'Milton and the Trinity', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 33.4, (1970), pp. 315–320; Michael Bauman, *Milton's Arianism* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Stopford A. Brooke, *Milton* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1879), p. 89.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon Campbell, 'De Doctrina Christiana: An England that Might Have Been', in *The Oxford Handbook of Milton*, eds. Nicholas McDowell and Nigel Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 424-436.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Lieb, 'Milton and "Arianism"', *Religion & Literature*, 32.2, (2000), 197-220.

creative choice, explaining that the Son is ‘the God of the earth, through whose person the God of heaven is made accessible to man’.<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere, the Father’s privileged status is criticised by William Empson who views the Son’s sacrifice as evidence for why the Miltonic and Christian Gods are ‘wicked’ and ‘sadistic’ for finding pleasure in torturing those in subordinate positions.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, the Son is hailed as the poem’s ‘modern hero’ for Corina Sandiuc who envisions the character as a ‘godlike man’ and ‘the deliverer’ who is ‘the provider of true liberty’.<sup>7</sup> Although fascination is usually associated with other major characters such as Satan in the poem, these varying perceptions illustrate the Son’s poetic power in provoking great thought and introspection in the minds of Milton’s readers. While this chapter does not seek to solve long standing debates on Milton’s theology, it will illuminate how the intersectional identities of modern readers have come to colour their encounters with the epic’s portrayal of the Son. It will unveil how Muslimah respondents adapt their interpretations with consideration of their religious beliefs, leading to an acceptance of the character, or a rejection of the Son on the basis of irrelevance, discomfort, and a lack of interest. This chapter will also unpack modern readerprints of readers from non-Muslim backgrounds, paying close attention to how they either feel drawn to the Son’s kindness and heroism; are critical of his arrogance and lack of autonomy; or are repelled by his complicity in the Fall of humankind.

Firstly, to appreciate the responses of Muslimah readers, it is crucial to highlight the religious significance of Jesus (*Isa*) in the Qur’an. In the Islamic tradition, Jesus is not

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<sup>5</sup> Marilyn Arnold, 'Milton's Accessible God: The Role of the Son in "Paradise Lost"', *Milton Quarterly*, 7.3, (1973), p. 65.

<sup>6</sup> William Empson, *Milton's God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) pp. 245-246.

<sup>7</sup> Corina Sandiuc, 'The Modern Hero in Milton's Paradise Lost: God The Son', *Scientific Bulletin ("Mircea cel Bătrân" Naval Academy)*, XX.2, (2017), 67-70. This idea that the Son triumphs as the ultimate hero in *Paradise Lost* is also evident in earlier works including Marianna Woodhull, *The Epic of Paradise Lost; Twelve Essays* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1907), p. 254.

recognised as the Son of God, but is understood to be a human Prophet and a revered messenger of God. This is made clear in the Qur'an where Allah says:

O People of the Book, do not go to excess in your religion, and do not say anything about God except the truth: the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, was nothing more than a messenger of God, His word directed to Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in God and His messengers and do not speak of a 'Trinity' – stop [this], that is better for you – God is only one God, He is far above having a son, everything in the heavens and earth belongs to Him and He is the best one to trust.

(Qu'ran 4: 171)

As reflected in this Qur'anic verse, Allah categorically rejects the trinity and makes it clear that Jesus was not His son, but His prophetic messenger. This is common knowledge for Muslims as it takes one outside the fold of Islam if God is believed to share His divinity. This is emphasised in the reception study conducted by Islam Issa, where when asking Egyptian readers what aspect of the poem would be most offensive to Arab-Muslim readers, almost half of the students' answers included comment on the presentation of the Son. Issa notes that *Paradise Lost* provides some immediate theological challenges for Muslim readers who automatically compare God the Son with Jesus in the Qur'an. Interestingly however, he finds that by relating aspects of the Son to Islamic beliefs about Jesus, Muslim readers can also adapt their reading of the character, or the poem on a whole, to Islamic beliefs.<sup>8</sup> In this reception study, a direct instance of this occurrence is visible in Canadian Muslimah Maysa's response:

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<sup>8</sup> Islam Issa, *Milton in the Arab Muslim World* (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 127-128.

*I actually was very interested in God the Son, because, again, I read him as Jesus (AS)<sup>9</sup> from the Islamic perspective, and so because of this lens I felt sympathy for him. There's a moment where God the Father is explaining the world's history to God the Son and telling him that all of these events will happen, but that there will be no intervention until God the Son appears to the people to save them. [...] And so in this moment, instead of thinking about God the Son as Jesus, I saw similarities between the role of God the Son and Islam's Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him). And it made me wonder if John Milton read the Qur'an or if he understood Islamic history or theology. Overall, my reaction did change as I saw the similarities between God the Son and the Prophet (SAW),<sup>10</sup> but I didn't stick to this perspective throughout my reading.*

- Maysa

Interestingly, pre-existing love and understanding towards Jesus in the Islamic tradition led this Muslimah to feel drawn to the Son in *Paradise Lost*. As a result, Maysa's poetic interpretation was combined together with her spiritual understanding as she found traces of the Prophet Muhammad's mission in Milton's depiction of God the Son. This mental journey allowed her to have a positive and sympathetic reading of a figure that is principally considered incompatible with her own religion. Maysa thus bypassed feelings of discomfort and found parallels between God the Son, Jesus, and the Prophet Muhammad. This sharply contrasts to British-Indian Muslimah Manal's reading who shared:

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<sup>9</sup> The term '(AS)' is an abbreviation for the Arabic phrase 'Alayhi-salam' which translates to 'peace be upon Him'. This is a common honorific title used by Muslims that is given to Prophets in Islam after the mention of their names.

<sup>10</sup> The term '(SAW)' is an abbreviation for the Arabic phrase 'Salla Allaahu 'alayhi Wa Salaam' which translates to 'God's blessings and peace be upon him'. This is a common honorific title used by Muslims that is given to the Prophet Muhammad after the mention of his name.

*I personally did not relate much to God the Son in the poem. I feel this is because Jesus in the Islamic Tradition plays a very different role and significance. - I was able to appreciate the poetic depiction of Christ, but was unable to relate or feel moved by this character.*

- Manal

For Manal, who I usually see as a ‘cultural accommodator’ due to her tendency to mediate between cultures in her readings, the figure of the Son was met with resistance as she struggled to reconcile or relate him to her Islamic beliefs. In effect, this created a sense of distance and emotional disconnect in her reading experience of the Son. Though she remained unmoved, Manal still made a point to show a level of respect and recognition to the poetic depiction of Christ. By contrast, Sannah who I also see as a ‘cultural accommodator’, saw God the Son as a fierce force in her readerprint:

*There is only one image that immediately sparks when picturing God the Son: him, carrying ten thousand thunders, storming into Heaven on a chariot with a face full of terror facing all of Milton's rebel, fallen angels. Depicted as physically fiercer than God the Father and read in Paradise Lost as more proactive in his actions and judgement against the enemies of Heaven. In the end, depicted as 'Saviour' still, chained to the cross to ensure mankind's final salvation. God the Son as God the Father's repeated sacrifice throughout the poem.*

- Sannah

This British-Pakistani Muslimah’s recollection of the Son was fused with an unmistakable admiration for what she perceived as a formidable portrayal of the character. As a result, the

Son was held in higher esteem in comparison to God the Father in the epic. It is worth noting that among the sample of Muslimah respondents, Sannah was unique in dwelling on the war in heaven in such a manner. This was particularly interesting given the fact that during our later in-person interview, the Muslimah respondent shared that she experienced a level of discomfort through this specific portrayal:

Eva: As a Muslim reader, are there any particular parts that make you feel uncomfortable? You've already mentioned Satan and God...

Sannah: Yes, definitely those two. The idea of God the Son, as well. Because of the fact that he was portrayed as a powerful character as well, he wasn't side-lined much, he was in a lot of the discussions with God and he was the saviour in the battle... I think that was slightly uncomfortable for me because obviously, in our religion, he doesn't exist in that form.

-Excerpt from interview with Sannah (1)

In an effort to try and unpack Sannah's feelings of discomfort, I decided to dig deeper. This led the 24-year-old to humorously mention that if she was to retell the story of *Paradise Lost* to others, a purposeful alteration of the narrative would be necessary to avoid similar reactions:

Eva: Would you feel comfortable describing the narrative of *Paradise Lost* in detail to someone from your community? How do you think that they would react to the poem?

Sannah: See, that's quite interesting because it would depend on the person from the community. If they were someone who was of a young age, our sort of age, with an educational background, and a genuine interest in literature, then I would go full out! You can explain everything, without fear or without being squeamish because you view it for what it is, which is a literary text. BUT, if it was to an older member of our community [laughs] who would *definitely* be squeamish about these different themes, then I would definitely sugar coat it. There would be things I would leave out. On PURPOSE.

Eva: Like what?

Sannah: I- you would just avoid and NOT mention ANYTHING that happened after that fall [Eva laughing]. You just wouldn't mention God the Son... [laughs] he don't exist [both laughing]. You just wouldn't mention Satan or the fact he's cool in the text, you just wouldn't mention that. They'd just look at you and be like, are you ok? [both laughing]

Eva: Shall we call the imam?

Sannah: HAHHAHA. YEAH, FULLY. And then they'd be like is this what we are paying for you to go to university? MashaAllah well done.<sup>11</sup> [both laughing] no, they wouldn't say that. So, yeah there would definitely be things that you would skirt over or miss out. I think it's definitely one of those texts where you are very aware of the

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<sup>11</sup> 'MashaAllah' is a common Arabic expression that translates to 'what God has willed'. It is generally used to express appreciation, amazement, praise, joy, and thankfulness. In this instance, Sannah uses the term in a sarcastic manner.



way you depict it to others. There are certain things you would discuss more with certain people, and not so much with others. I think, in terms of cultural background, yeah. There would be a lot you'd leave out. [laughing]

Eva: Would this be the case if you were to describe the poem to someone else who does not share your background?

Sannah: No, that wouldn't be the case, I'd say everything. [Eva laughing, Sannah grinning] I would! I would.

-Excerpt from interview with Sannah (2)

This exchange reveals the many different layers of comfort a Muslim reader may consider when encountering literary figures such as the Son. For Sannah, though she had a positive perception of the character and regarded Milton's depiction as fierce and impressive, on her part, it is a careful and cautioned admiration. This Muslimah reader knew that the existence of God the Son is irreconcilable with her own beliefs but also felt that as someone who is accustomed to engaging with texts on a literary level, she was better equipped to navigate such matters that theologically conflict with her own views.

Also noticing a difference between religious scripture and God the Son in *Paradise Lost* was Christian reader Natasha who wrote:

*I certainly liked God the Son more than God the Father in Paradise Lost. I think this comes from his greater connection with humanity, in contrast to God the Father's seeming detachment at points. His sympathy towards Adam and Eve after the Fall felt reflective of a greater openness to and acceptance of their fallibility. It almost feels*

*without the influence of God the Son [sic. in] Paradise Lost, Adam and Eve would have had a much worse fate. This is interesting as God the Son doesn't really exist in the Bible, it is just God who oversees and deals with the Fall and its consequences. This is the God- 'God the Father' in Paradise Lost who seems to only be more swayed towards the redemption of mankind after God the Son's insight. I also felt myself feeling sympathy towards God the Son as it seemed that the crux of his motivation was to please God the Father in redeeming mankind rather than to save humanity. This brought about the feeling that he was trapped or confined to a rigid Filial role. God the Son always seems to be overshadowed by God the Father as reinforced at points in the poem where this 'Filial responsibility', the instinct to please God the Father comes first and foremost.*

- Natasha

Natasha's statement bears resemblance to Arnold's belief that the Son in *Paradise Lost* acts as a 'mediator' between man and God.<sup>12</sup> While the Father is critiqued and considered a detached figure by Natasha; the Son is generally regarded more positively and viewed in a sympathetic light. Recognising the character's strong presence in the poem, this Christian reader understood that mercy for the human pair was contingent on the Son's intercession. Despite this, God the Son's intentions are problematised by Natasha who feels as though he was 'trapped' and 'confined' in a state of filial duty. This was a concern shared by other readers in the study including Jewish participant Miriyam:

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<sup>12</sup> Arnold, p. 67.

*I was sympathetic towards him but it appeared to me that he was a son wanting his father's approval rather than wanting to aid/save the human race. However, I found that he was kind and I was quite moved by this character.*

- Miriyam

For this Jewish reader, the motivations of the Son were not considered to be selfless but were instead thought to be inspired out of a need to be recognised by the Father. Unlike Natasha and Miriyam who still shared feelings of admiration and sympathy for the Son, Christian reader Stark was less convinced:

*I do not look as [sic. at] God as Jesus. From reading Paradise Lost, I could see no way, personally, that God was a saviour. He may be a leader, but from the actions taken I personally saw no actions of Him saving people. He cast them out with no help at all because of His own misactions and believes that they were the ones who caused it. He does not take responsibility for His own failings. By not accepting that he is not as perfect as things make Him out to be, he has become arrogant, tricking Himself into believeing [sic.] that he is 'saving' others. And it can be interpreted that He did. By casting out Satan, it could be said that it saved him from being scorned by the other Angels, to not be subjected to the fact that he does not agree with God's wishes. By casting Adam and Eve, he saved them from having to live in a 'paradise' that was otherwise caging them.*

- Stark

Though Stark also regarded the Son as being caged in an external structure, he displayed no feelings of sympathy for the character. Instead, by comparing God the Son with his own

beliefs, Stark perceived the character to be a flawed figure with impure motivations. As the depiction was incoherent with Stark's own understandings of Christ, in the end, Milton's Son was rejected by this reader. By contrast, Alex who is a lapsed Christian respondent, revealed that she did consider God the Son to be "sympathetic". Alex explained that the character's self-sacrifice and compassion in the poem played a significant role in helping to establish this perspective. She added, however, that she was predisposed to understand God the Son in this light because of her Protestant upbringing. In agreement with Alex's character evaluation of God the Son, Lisa, who also identified as a lapsed Christian, likewise perceived the Son as self-sacrificing, loving, and sympathetic. Yet, Lisa differed from Sannah by not enjoying the Son's entrance during the war in heaven:

*I did like God the Son, and found him much more appealing than the Father. he obviously has a lot of good qualities which we all aim to have - he is selfless, merciful, passionate, loving, and bravely makes the ultimate sacrifice. I often found myself thinking I wish he featured a bit more in the poem! However, some of the ways in which Milton characterises him I'm not as keen on - for example I don't particularly like the classical allusions he attributes to the Son, such as the episode in the chariot. Especially because Satan is often compared to classical heroes, I think using these same comparisons with the Son undermines him.*

- Lisa

When comparing the allusions that came to Lisa's mind, it is easy to understand why she reached this conclusion.

High in the midst exalted as a god

The Apostate in his sun-bright chariot sat  
 Idol of majesty divine, enclosed  
 With flaming cherubim, and golden shields

(Book VI: 99-102)

In the passage above, the prideful image of Satan sitting high upon his chariot has striking resemblance to the Son who is described in a similar fashion:

The chariot of paternal deity,  
 Flashing thick flames, wheel within wheel undrawn,  
 Itself instinct with spirit, but convoyed  
 By four cherubic shapes, four faces each  
 Had wondrous, as with stars their bodies all  
 And wings were set with eyes, with eyes the wheels  
 Of beryl, and careering fires between;  
 Over their heads a crystal firmament,  
 Whereon a sapphire throne, inlaid with pure  
 Amber, and colours of the showery arch.

(Book VI: 750-759)

The similar use of language and classical allusions were enough to create a negative response in Lisa, the lapsed Christian reader. In this instance, then, we understand that innovative additions to the Biblical narrative were not always welcomed and were occasionally regarded to be poor choices on the part of the poet. For Lisa, classical allusions were unsettling as they were not unique to God the Son's character. In particular, the comparable allusions used in

the wartime descriptions of Satan and the Son were something that this lapsed Christian reader did not appreciate.

Another participant who was dissatisfied with Milton's depiction of God the Son was Christian participant Catherine:

*I think that "God the Son" as a character in a story suffers from a similar problem of "God the Father": he is God. I feel like Milton wanted to depict him as a more loving facet of "God the Father" and you can probably see it in the way he acts. But he is all-perfect, the conquering hero, the tender Judge. No matter Adam and Eve's fall, his victory is already decided before the beginning. And that doesn't work well for creating a compelling character.*

- Catherine

Catherine went on to share that because of existing personal and deep-rooted Catholic beliefs, her "failure" to recognise God the Son as a sympathetic character was possibly connected to the fact that he is not yet the Jesus Christ incarnate that she knows and loves. The Christian participant reported struggling to distinguish between what Milton's characterisation of the Son and her idea of what that characterisation should have been. Despite all efforts, Catherine did not recognise the Son's humanity and thus lost her connection with him in the story.

In another case with a Christian respondent, a similar conflicted reading experience was recorded:

*In Paradise Lost, the Son of God appeared to me to be arrogant, described with glory, power and honour which I do agree Jesus deserves. However, Jesus in the Bible humbled himself even to the point of death and does not arrive in blazes of*

*glory. As a Christian I loved reading about the triumph of God through Christ, it was really moving to read about my saviour in the poetics and language of Milton.*

- Judy

Like Lisa, Judy's admission suggests that she was not in favour of the Son's war sequence in Book 6. Though this Christian reader did agree that Jesus was worthy of honorific and powerful descriptions, the allusions of the Son arriving in 'blazes of glory' led her to believe that the character was arrogant. For Judy, the image of Christ in humble servitude was one that she was more comfortable and familiar with and therefore easier to reconcile. Contrarily, Joseph found Milton's portrait of the Son invigorating:

*I am very fond of Milton's God the Son, increasingly so as the poem progressed. I like Him in Book 3 when he offers to sacrifice himself for His kindness, and then His tenderness comes out in a much richer and concrete way during the judgement scene. It seemed appropriately Christ-like. Even when He is fierce in the War in Heaven, it seems fitting and is utterly sublime. I both love and fear Milton's God the Son so much more than his God the Father. He seems close to that strange mix of utter compassion and utter severity you find in the gospel depictions of Jesus.*

- Joseph

As a Christian reader, Joseph regarded Milton's multifaceted reimagining of Christ as complementary to his own understanding. Describing the war in heaven as "utterly sublime", the epic's poetic adaptation was something that enhanced the Christian reader's admiration. When compared with Judy and Catherine's response, it is interesting to note Joseph's mention of both loving and fearing Milton's Son. For this reader, fearsome portrayals of the

Son were embraced and did not cause any discomfort or agitation. This is reflective of the complex nature of each readers' differing relationships with faith, as it exemplifies how despite the shared religion of these participants, each individual has their own understanding of God, which in turn, influences their worldviews and readerprints.

Variations between participants in other religious sample groups are further evident when analysing Riya's response:

*My first impression of God the Son was that he exemplifies the more loving, interactive and actionable God. He is presented as being the almost opposite of God in terms of character but he is firmly loyal to God the Father himself. For me, God the Son was not much of an engaging character despite his pivotal role in redeeming man. Instead, I see him as quite an honest character in which I automatically trust that his speech and actions are for the benefit of humankind and not for selfish reasons such as Lucifer.*

- Riya

British-Pakistani Muslimah respondent Riya viewed the character of God the Son in a positive and compassionate light. While a number of the Muslimah participants in this study discussed God the Son's existence in relation to their Islamic frameworks, for Riya, whom I have elsewhere designated as a 'contrarian', God the Son was not read in an Islamic context. Despite finding the Son as less engaging than others in the poem, it was interesting to observe Riya praise the character for his loyal duty to the Father. This contrasts the viewpoints of Natasha, Miriyam, and Stark who earlier questioned the Son's motivations behind his actions and critiqued his dominant desire to please God the Father. For Riya, this did not seem to be an issue as she "automatically" trusted the character's judgement. When praising the Son, the



Muslimah reader juxtaposed the Son with “Lucifer” (or Satan) who was conceived to be a selfish and dislikeable creature in comparison. Christian reader Andrew shared a similar view:

*The Son is ever the voice of Mercy, working alongside the Father (the voice of Justice) and submitting His own will to the Father's. This is also most clear in Book III. The poem does not focus on the Son as much as it does on the Father, but the Son is still greatly significant for his self-sacrificial love. Satan remains jealous of the Son, for being higher in the Father's favour. Yet the reader trusts in the Son, who in turn trusts in the Father ('Thou wilt not leave me in the lonesome grave'), because He has promised to save us while Satan has promised to corrupt us. Books XI-XII prophesise how the Son will do this, making it clear that only He can bring us salvation. The Son is also portrayed as an [sic.] heroic figure, in His wars against Satan and self-sacrifice for us.*

- Andrew

Crowning the Son as a hero of *Paradise Lost*, Andrew's admiration of the character lay in his trust in both God in the poem, and God in his personal life. The Christian reader shared that his understanding of *Paradise Lost* came “almost purely from religion”, enabling him to recognise the true extent of the Father's love, in that “He would rather sacrifice His own Son for us than destroy our fallen selves”. The influence of Andrew's faith was unquestionably projected in his interpretation of Milton's characters, allowing for an unwavering heroic portrait of God the Son.

By contrast, Timothy, who also identifies as a Christian reader, was less captivated by the Son in *Paradise Lost*:

*I far prefer Milton's Jesus in Paradise Regained: but he is totally different to the Son in Paradise Lost. When I read passages about God the Son in Paradise Lost, I feel like I am entering into centuries of theological debate, whereas I find that the portrayal of Jesus wondering through the desert far easier to engage personally with. I think this is because the questions raised by the figure of Jesus in Paradise Regained speak to my own uncertainties. In Paradise Lost, there is so much certainty that surround God the Son, but in Paradise Regained, there is so much uncertainty: throughout most of it, Jesus asks "what am I doing" and "where is all this leading?". The final and deeply powerful final simile, comparing Jesus to Oedipus solving the Sphinx's riddle (and to Hercules killing the monster Cacus), is perhaps the passage from all of Milton's poetry that I am most fascinated by. It's because it's confusing (what \*has\* Jesus worked out?), seemingly inappropriate (why compare Jesus to the most famous of all patricides, Oedipus?). In Paradise Lost, God the Son is stable, always \*good\*, but I find that the God the Son, or Jesus, in Paradise Regained is so much more attractive to me as a reader because, right at the end of Milton's poetical career, the answer seems to be yet another question. Overall, I think reason why I am unmoved by God the Son in Paradise Lost is because, unlike Jesus in Paradise Regained, there is unquestioning certainty in his role in the poem. But in Paradise Regained, it's the unrelenting questioning and ambiguity that appeals to me.*

- Timothy

Doctoral student Timothy stated that the Genesis narrative did not influence his reading.

Unlike Andrew, the Christian reader remained unmoved by Son's "stable" portrayal and was drawn to what he perceived as a more complex, and multi-faceted portrait of Jesus in

*Paradise Regained*. Helena, who identifies as an atheist respondent, also referred to Milton's depiction of Jesus in *Paradise Regained*. However, these portrayals did not induce sympathy for this reader as she described the Son as "duplicitous" and deemed him responsible for the Fall alongside the Father:

*In many ways, the Son is like Satan in that he is the God character's favourite. Although we as readers know that he will not fall as Satan does, it is also difficult to sympathise with the character because he is yet another creation of the omnipotent God who may be viewed simply as a better version of Lucifer with all of his strengths and none of his flaws. In "Paradise Regained," the Son is even described as "our morning star," a clear reference to the previous status of Satan as Lucifer (morning star). I think I feel disconnected with this character because there is a great sense that he is complicit in the suffering of Satan and his fellow fallen angels, and in that of Adam and Eve. Though he is the one to give them clothes if I remember correctly, as he is essentially an extension of the God character, I cannot truly read his actions as wholly good because any suffering may have been prevented in the first place.*

- Helena

As a non-religious reader, Helena expressed that while the inspirational material for the poem was important to bear in mind, she also thought it was wise to look at the poem as "one person's interpretation and reimagining of a story". She recognised that her background meant that she was "not moved by the thought of there being an all-powerful being pulling all the strings" and believed that this allowed her to be "more harsh" with the text as opposed to someone who is of faith. In effect, this resulted in an unsympathetic reading. Fellow

participant Penelope also reflected on her atheistic background influencing her reading of God the Son:

*I was somewhat more sympathetic towards God the Son than God the Father during my reading of the poem, as he seemed more of a human character with genuine struggles to contend with and less distant than God the Father. It felt like Milton wanted me to sympathise with God the Son more than I actually did, however, and this could be due to my lack of belief in Christianity.*

- Penelope

Though Penelope was not as critical as Helena, in her reading, God the Son was less sympathetic due to his association with God the Father. Despite this being the case, Penelope appreciated that that he was a figure who seemed less distant in the poem. This was not a sentiment shared by post-doctoral Christian participant Clara who revealed her disappointment in Milton's "flat" portrayal of God the Son:

*I feel relatively unmoved by the Son. He doesn't appear to do a huge amount - I feel as though he is merely a prop for God the Father to exert his will through! I know he plays a part in the battle, but his announcement that he will be the one to save mankind falls a little flat in my opinion. He rather seems to be quite a one-dimensional character.*

- Clara

Unlike previous respondents who were moved by God in Son in *Paradise Lost*, Clara remained unimpressed. This notion of the Son operating as a "prop" for the Father was a

shared feeling for numerous participants who felt that the character lacked depth and had little or no autonomy. Jewish participant Ruth's response had a similar impression:

*I thought that God the Son didn't have a fully rounded character and lacked human characteristics. He was just meek and mild and I don't think my opinion of him changed for the better the more I read the poem.*

- Ruth

This differed to Muslimah respondent Alya who reflected on the Son's tasks in the poem:

*The son seems to complete many of the arduous tasks in Paradise Lost, like banishing Satan and creating elements of the universe, like mankind. This is unusual, as the term 'son' in itself (or maybe in a contemporary sense) denotes someone who needs to be looked after by a parental figure (the 'father'). This also is surprising to me, as God the Father in Milton appears to be less present than God the Son.*

- Alya

As someone I deem an 'objectivist' thinker, Alya's method of reading *Paradise Lost* meant that she tried to approach the text without thinking about her own background.<sup>13</sup> With this in mind, God the Son was a figure who struck her as strangely less dependent on his Father. In another case of a Muslimah reader, it was through the portrayal of God the Son that British-Bangladeshi reader Hana was able to uncover the didactic elements of the poem:

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<sup>13</sup> See chapter on Satan for a deeper analysis on Alya's approach.

*While I do not agree with God the son as a religious belief, I think for Milton, especially in the seventeenth century, it served a political purpose. If the son, a human manifestation of God, can perform the difficult tasks on earth, it gives Milton's readers a reason to be good, and see the good qualities that god have places [sic. has placed] in humans.*

- Hana

For this 'cultural accommodator', God the Son's narrative function was to emphasise the innate goodness in each individual, thus encouraging them to act upon these attributes in their own lives. God the Son's power of inducing self-reflection in readers was also reported by Skyla, a lapsed Christian reader:

*My reaction to God the Son remained largely unchanged throughout my reading of Paradise Lost and it was one that ignited feelings of guilt and other difficult emotions. Guilt because his self-sacrifice as a character is moving and led me to consider my own unselfish actions (or lack of). God the Son has a power of his own, which on the surface it undetectable because it's a personal power that he uses for others. It is flexible and unconditional unlike God the Father's rigid and conditional power.*

- Skyla

Though Skyla despised God the Father in the poem, she did not place any blame on Milton's Son. Intriguingly, when choosing descriptors associated with the Son's character, the lapsed Christian reader opted for the words "submissive" and "hero". Fascinatingly, it seems, then, that one can still achieve the status of a hero even if it meant loyal servitude to a God who is

regarded as “duplicitous” and a “tyrant”. Contrasting Skylar, Lucas stated that he never experienced an emotional response while reading the Son’s segments:

*The Son in Paradise Lost interests me from a theological perspective, given what I know about Milton's anti-trinitarianism, but I have never had a very strong visceral or emotional response to the Son, either positive or negative.*

- Lucas

It is worth acknowledging that this outlook is rare in the study – especially with the consideration that the majority of respondents would not have encountered theological discourse in Milton studies as extensively as Lucas’ case suggests. As a participant who studied at doctoral level, Lucas’ interest is understandable. Moreover, it is intriguing to note that this lapsed Christian reader did not have an emotional response to the Son. This was despite his declaration that he was formerly “militant” in his unbelief, finding Satan heroic and God malicious. Now, growing older, Lucas said he had more respect for the Christian tradition and has “increasingly come to find the opposite”. Comparatively, a respondent who did have a more animated reaction towards the Son was Simone, who identifies as an atheist:

*It's the Son's freedom to choose, but also his remarkable intuition and understanding of God's Word that, for me, makes him compelling. He listens to God, and seizes on the most significant aspects of his speech - the possibility of Grace for humankind after the Fall. To me this is a profound exchange in the poem; the Son is working things out as he articulates. Again, it makes me feel in awe of the Son as Milton seems to present him as supremely, intuitively and intellectually connected to God, and God*

*allows him, by his own free will, to work out how they might be redeemed and put himself forward to die. It's a staggering proposition of love.*

- Simone

Reflecting as a post-doctoral respondent, Simone made a point not to refer to the Son as God, “given Milton’s Arianism”. Though Milton’s Arianism is debated by critics, as explained in the opening of this chapter, this reveals how Simone aligned herself with critics who are of this opinion.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, in contrast to previously mentioned participants who viewed the Son as “meek and mild” (Ruth), and as “merely a prop for God the Father to exert his will through” (Clara), Simone recognised the Son as an intensely intellectual being who had a freedom to choose, act, and love. Addressing her own non-religious beliefs, the atheist participant shared that in order to appreciate Milton’s thought, she felt that one could read the poem with a spiritual mindset and sensitivity without actually believing or endorsing those views herself. While most participants compared the Son with the Father or Satan, Simone’s rich contribution was unique in paralleling the Son with Eve:

*I am also fascinated by the close relationship that Milton draws between the Son and Eve, which makes me greatly admire the strength of both characters. Eve's words after the Fall echo the loving and self-sacrificing words of the Son in book 3 (237, 241): she insists that the punishment should fall "On me, me only" (10.832). This strikes me as an incredibly exciting and feminist relationship for Milton to draw, especially for a man writing over 350 years ago. Adam has always been seen as a type of Christ, but here is Milton saying that Eve is unwittingly emulating Christ's*

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<sup>14</sup> See Kelley, pp. 315–20, and Brooke, p. 89.



*most extraordinary proposition. As much as the Son fascinates me, Milton's mind and original thinking does.*

- Simone

Captivated by the poet's imagination in crafting the Son, for this atheist participant, Milton's intricate associations with Eve's character intensified her fascination. By contrast, in Christian reader Grace's case, admiration for the Son did not occur instantly, but grew gradually in later years of study. In order to achieve this mindset, ideas of the Son's rigid perfection had to be dismantled:

*The Son is a work of love in the poem. Whilst clearly second to the Father, his beauty is much more palpable. However, initially when I read the text at undergraduate level I perceived the Son as a little bit too perfect, a bit of a suck up (I was more drawn to sharing Satan's view of him there). The more I read the more I begin to see him as charismatic with substance, as an ambassador of the most personal kind; the best MP you could hope for. I am particularly moved by the description of his volunteering to "die" in Book III and even more so by Adam's reaction to being told of the Son in the form of the Christ he is to become in Book XII, because it depicts him in such human and Godly terms in equal measure (even before he becomes human) and depicts a flawed yet perfect human response to self-sacrificing love.*

- Grace

In comparison to some Christian respondents who were disturbed by the poem's rendition of Christ that they were unfamiliar with, Grace appreciated Milton's achievement of depicting the character who had a perfect balance of being both divine and human. For this Christian

reader, scenes describing the Son's self-sacrifice were ones that left this lasting imprint of admiration.

Compounding her own religious beliefs with the Son, Ellis, a reader who identifies as a Christian convert, viewed the portrayal as spiritually fulfilling:

*[...] as with God the father, the amount of love portrayed in Paradise Lost from the Son aspect resonates a lot. When he says that He will die for us and pities us, it really brings to mind the awe I feel at the salvation we attain through Jesus' sacrifice. To know there is someone who loves you unconditionally is a potent thing when everything else is so transient. Furthermore, no matter what you have done, God is willing to die for you. I think Milton captures these aspects really well and connects with readers.*

- Ellis

Similar to Grace, the sacrificial elements of the Son stood out to Ellis, whose engagement with the Son was clearly coloured by her own religious framework. The Christian reader reflected that because she understood God in her own life, it made all the difference to her perception of divine figures in the poem. In effect, this coloured her interpretation of the Son as an unconditionally loving being. Contrasting Ellis' observations on the Son, Muslimah reader Nusayba also strongly felt that she understood God in her own life, leading her to perceive the Son as treacherous:

*Although I did not focus on the Son in my research my brief thoughts of the Son's depiction mainly revolved around him being somewhat of a treacherous figure to my own religious beliefs. Where the Son was linked with God, Milton's statement that he*

*was going to justify God's actions to the mass was not fully justified in relation to the Son. The Son's sacrificial actions in the poem, to me, felt like they were not fully explained to a person who stands outside of the Christian beliefs.*

- Nusayba

This interpretation shows how a Muslim reader may deem the Son problematic in the poem. Due to the heavy influence of her own religious identification, I categorise Nusayba as a ‘conformist’. Though other Muslimah participants including Sannah and Maysa found a way to navigate the absence of the figure in the Islamic tradition and still interact with the Son in *Paradise Lost*, Nusayba expressed difficulty in discussing the fictional portrayal. During our in-person interview, the British-Bi-racial Muslimah shared that “just saying the word Son of God” felt weird and uncomfortable. Trying to make sense of this, Nusayba reflected that it was similar to Greek mythology where gods could be discussed, except unlike this case, those stories were not attached to figures in her own religion. When asking her to elaborate on why she considered the Son “treacherous”, our exchange was the following:

Eva: [...] there’s another part that I found really interesting in your response where I asked if you found the poem problematic at all, and you said only in relation to the Son. You said: “apart from the figure of the Son, not really” and when it came to answering questions on the figure of the Son, you said that you found him to be quite a treacherous figure.

Nusayba: In relation to again, my religion, if I separate my religion away from the text being poetic, but if I combine it – because Islam is part of my identity, we don’t

have a Son of God. So to me, that was like weird... I didn't really focus on him to be honest. It was probably for that reason.

Eva: Because you couldn't relate?

Nusayba: Yeah. I mentioned him a few times but just writing or even saying "Son of God", you know... it's weird.

Eva: It's unnatural for us

Nusayba: Yeah we don't say that, we don't believe it and it's not in our hearts at all. See, other than that I didn't really explore him too much so I can't give you much information.

-Excerpt from interview with Nusayba

I could sense Nusayba's physical discomfort when sharing these thoughts, and my own interjections were an effort to remedy that and make her feel seen and understood. Though the feelings of other Muslimah participants were not as pronounced, from this case, we understand the very real difficulties a reader from a Muslim background may feel when considering the Son's presence in *Paradise Lost*. Unable to comprehend the character in line with her religious beliefs, the Son was thereby rejected by this reader. Fascinatingly, this instance of rejection by a Muslimah reader was the most overt example in the whole study.

In conclusion, Milton's adaptation of the Son created very different responses in his modern readers which commonly led them to accept or reject the character. The absence of God the Son in Islamic tradition meant that Muslimah respondents often adapted their

interpretations in relation to their beliefs in order to comprehend the presence in the poem. For one reader, this meant paralleling the figure with pre-existing love and understanding she had for the prophets Jesus and Muhammad in the Qur'an, allowing a sympathetic reading. While for another, the Son's fierce role in the war in heaven was looked upon with a careful and cautioned admiration. One Muslimah focussed on the didactic purpose of the Son, while others struggled to find a correlation and expressed a lack of interest. In the instance where religion was not adapted, the Son was disregarded and considered treacherous by a 'conformist' Muslimah reader. By contrast, in cases where religion was not mentioned by Muslimahs, the Son was either compared to Satan and praised for his loyal servitude to God the Father or was found to be surprisingly less dependent on him. For lapsed Christian and Christian readers, the Son was typically compared to readers' own understandings of Jesus in the New Testament and religious writing, leading them to feel apprehensive or admiration towards the Son. Milton's descriptions during the war in heaven were either embraced as sublime imaginings which amplified Christ's power, or were critiqued for promoting an arrogant image of the Son. In other instances, the sacrificial segments describing the Son illustrated Christ's loving nature and encouraged Christian and lapsed Christian readers to reflect on their own lives. Finally, a number of respondents across the non-Muslim sample remained unimpressed by the Son and questioned his intentions and motivation. Alternatively, others saw him as a figure who was trapped in an external structure. A number of atheist respondents expressed that their non-religious background explained their disconnect with the figure in the poem, while other readers were still able to recognise the Son as a figure of love and compassion in the poem despite their own disbelief. In the end, then, we realise that when it comes to interpreting the Son in *Paradise Lost*, much of what a reader understands, whether consciously or subconsciously, is fuelled by their own background.

## Satan

To the best recollection of my undergraduate years, some the liveliest conversations concerning the poem were often the ones that discussed Satan – the fury-filled fallen angel in *Paradise Lost*. With widened eyes and outstretched hands, the diverse voices of that seminar room were routinely bursting with heartfelt defences and condemnations that either redeemed or damned the devil. This is not so surprising given the historical debate concerning the character of Satan in the poem thus far. In scholarly criticism, we understand that when it came to the early reception of the poem, Milton's contemporaries were not always keen on the poet's depiction of the devil and often considered it a blasphemy portrayal.<sup>1</sup> Later, and more famously, the Romantics contended that Milton unconsciously favoured Satan and 'was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it',<sup>2</sup> whilst C.S. Lewis challenged the notion that Satan was the hero of *Paradise Lost*.<sup>3</sup> In *The Satanic Epic*, Neil Forsyth reveals the importance of Satan, maintaining that the character seduces the reader in several ways as his dominating presence makes the text inveigling, unreliable, seductive and fascinating.<sup>4</sup> Stanley Fish argues that the poem acts as a self-revelatory experience through a process of humiliation and education, and that the reader is 'intangled' in Satan's rhetoric and is forced to re-evaluate their judgement.<sup>5</sup> Whilst critics have done well to encapsulate the prominence of Satan's character in the poem, there has clearly been a tendency to generalise readers. This is troublesome if we are to consider the reading experiences of more minority groups from non-traditionalist or different faith backgrounds, including those in that vibrant seminar classroom.

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<sup>1</sup> William Poole, 'The Early Reception of *Paradise Lost*', *Literature Compass*, 1.1, (2004), 1-13 (7).

<sup>2</sup> William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, ed. by Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press, 1975).

<sup>3</sup> Lewis, C. S., *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 101-103.

<sup>4</sup> Neil Forsyth, *The Satanic Epic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p.7.

<sup>5</sup> Stanley Eugene Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (London: Macmillan, 1967), pp. 9-14.

For readers who come from a Muslim background, the figure of Satan (or *Shaythaan/Iblees*) is one that they would likely be familiar with through Islamic scripture and tradition; and therefore, one can reasonably assume that they would have some sort of connection or foreknowledge to an Abrahamic retelling of Satan's story, and perhaps a different response to their peers. This chapter will investigate this claim, paying close attention to Muslimah readers and their non-Muslim counterparts by shedding light on how the character of Satan is perceived in modern minds today. By exploring how readers navigate through narratives of difference and feelings of discomfort while reading Satan, it will analyse how the character unifies some readers through markers of relatability and leads others to experience anxieties in their own understandings of faith. Finally, it will investigate the crucial part played by considering a reader's unique readerprint, revealing how these colour interpretations of Milton's Satan and enhance the understanding of his character, our own selves, and each other. In effect, this chapter will demonstrate interesting complexities when we take into account assumptions about group identity and religious/non-religious allegiances and affiliations.

If we are to search for examples of the plurality of readers, we need not look any further than at the diverse modern-day responses to Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost*. It is in these divergent voices that we find expectations shattered, paradoxes plaguing minds, and complexities being awakened. In *Faithful Labourers*, John Leonard warns that Satan is making a 'cautious comeback' in literary tradition, explaining that critics never have been, and never will be 'agreed' about the figure as it is the nature of the adversary to provoke dissent.<sup>6</sup> My later chapter on 'Teaching *Paradise Lost* in UK Higher Education' illustrates how the character of Satan has often dominated conversation and thematic focuses within

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<sup>6</sup> John Leonard, *Faithful Labourers: A Reception History of 'Paradise Lost', 1667-1970: Volume II: Interpretive Issues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 89.

classrooms. When looking at the readerprints of respondents themselves, Leonard's prediction is affirmed as, for many, Satan has left a lasting impression and remains one of the most memorable characters of *Paradise Lost*. However, it is important to note that this does not necessarily mean that Satan's character is favoured or celebrated for the same readers. Unlike the responses towards Eve's character for example, statements on Satan are noticeably far more difficult to categorise. When commenting on the fallen angel, a fair proportion of the responses seemed to transcend participants' usual practice in describing liking or disliking Milton's portrayal of character. Instead, respondents from across the sample tended to approach questions on the figure of Satan more thematically and allegorically (through a mention of topics including: democracy; tyranny; victim/antihero complex; rhetoric; morality; blame; actions vs intentions; popular culture; and relatability), which in themselves, were very telling. This also revealed something more about the generic nature of Milton's epic which falls somewhere between an older allegorical model and a newer, psychological one that will later find full expression in drama and the novel. For instance, when making comparisons with older Virgilian and Homeric models where characters often acted as ciphers for ideas, such as 'Achilles the Proud One' and 'Odysseus the Wily One', Milton's Satan would certainly represent 'the Evil One'. However, as well as having that allegorical dimension and status, the character's novelistic qualities awaken a deeper complexity, moving the fallen figure towards something that resembles more of a dramatic rendering of an inner life. Picking up on this almost subconsciously, the readers of this reception study thus responded to the character of Satan in a dualistic way, thinking about him both as a figure who represents something bad and evil, but at the same time, as someone that they could identify with and relate to. This explains why, in a phenomenon of discourse, I have observed the term 'relatability' to come to predominate the responses, which will be explored further as this chapter develops.



When analysing the Christian respondents in the study, Milton's characterisation of Satan was met by an overall impression of ambivalence. For most participants in this group, they often felt moved and sympathetic to Satan, but were still reluctant to view him in a positive light when reminded of his sinful state:

*I think at first, I felt sympathetic because of the actions of God the Father. Having been cast aside, it is understandable that Satan wants to rebel and rise against a creator which he deems tyrannical. But as the poem continues, and he tries to incite rebellion in his legions. He seems to be as tyrannical (to me) as he suggests that God the Father is. Really, his actions seem to stem from jealousy. I do feel sympathetic and sad for Satan when he watches Eve (and I think Adam is there too?) and wonders what it would be like to have a "normal" relationship. But this sympathy is undermined, for me, when he tempts Eve in an attempt to destroy the work of God and the happiness and success of mankind.*

- Stacey

Similarly for Catherine, feelings of sympathy were eventually lost as the narrative progressed:

*My reaction to Satan was ambivalent. He is a fascinating character: he's fallen and driven by this desperation of vengeance; and of course, he's cunning, ambitious, proud, but, first and foremost, he's someone who felt he had been wronged. And I, as reader, know how that feels. Milton, I think, was very careful while crafting the motivations behind Satan's actions, because those are the driving forces behind the whole poem (I suppose). In so doing, he made Satan much more relatable to human*

*beings. Yet, when the story arrived to the main point, I had lost much of the initial fascination. He is depicted as less relatable at that point. I think, in a sense, he slowly grows into his own monstrosity.*

- Catherine

The notion of relatability alluded to by Catherine is a broad term used by many of the respondents across all sample groups. For many, relatability is synonymous with identification as it amounts to a character having psychological attributes and emotions that are recognisably similar to our own. In *Such Stuff as Dreams*, Keith Oatley explains how these emotional responses work more broadly in fiction:

[...] we engage with issues because they are emotionally important to us, having to do with people, with intentions, and with outcomes. The emotions we experience are not primarily those of the characters, they are our own. [...] Empathetic identification occurs when we insert the character's goals, plans, or actions, into our own planning precursor, and we come to feel in ourselves the emotions that occur with the results of actions that we perform mentally as if in the place of the character.<sup>7</sup>

This can lead readers to have an attraction to characters that they detest, which may be difficult for them to understand. In the case of considering Satan's anthropomorphic portrayal, relating to Satan has led respondents including Catherine, to identify and sympathise with the creature in some way. When reflecting on Satan's persona, the mutuality of the shared human experience certainly increased levels of engagement and fascination for many of the participants. Christian PhD student, Grace touched upon this in her observation:

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<sup>7</sup> Keith Oatley, *Such Stuff as Dreams* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 115-116.

*I love Satan, but I hate hell. [...] Within the context of hell, I am not particularly attracted or sympathetic to the character, but the moments in which he speaks to himself I find deeply moving because they show a deeply relatable weakness and recalcitrance, desperation and greed. I also see, in the beginning of the text, a virtuosic theologian -- an intelligence and wit, yet no wisdom by the end. I find myself invested in his potential return to God, particularly his speech in Book 4 when he speaks of 'A grateful mind by owing owes not, but still pays, at once indebted and discharged; what burden then?', because it is when he is on the precipice of complete darkness and irrecoverable light that he wrestles with his thoughts and to be a party to that process gives one a lot to think about not just poetically, but theologically and existentially.*

- Grace

For Grace, there was a level of comfort in contemplating these theological and existential questions. This may be attributed to the fact that she was far more familiar with the text as a doctoral researcher, as opposed to many of the other respondents whose exposure to the poem was during their undergraduate study. In contrast, April remained unimpressed whilst stating:

*I found it [Milton's representation of Satan] uncomfortable but also true to the interpretation I understood before. He is charismatic and tries to draw sympathy yet causes destruction and is selfish in his motives.*

- April

In order to understand the root of April's discomfort, when delving deeper into her questionnaire response, it was obvious that her religious formation had indeed heavily influenced her unique readerprint. She admitted that this was something that she herself was aware of and stated that she would recommend *Paradise Lost* for others to read only after studying Genesis as "it is important for its cultural impact and significance but not for an accurate interpretation of a religious moment that has a bearing on three major world religions". April's feeling of defensiveness towards her religion was further highlighted when she explained that the Bible coloured her interpretation "a lot" as she compared everything in Milton to Genesis and found the characters quite "jarring" when they did not align with her own understanding. She shared that she grew up as a Christian, took Bible study, and studied Ancient Hebrew which profoundly influenced her understandings of both the narrative of Genesis, and therefore *Paradise Lost*. April confessed to feeling impulses of anger whilst reading the poem and stated that it was nonetheless interesting to explore someone's interpretation of Genesis and preview a snapshot of the theological sector of the time.

Noting the spiritual sensitivity of some readers, it is useful to draw upon the response of Andrew, a male Christian respondent, who shared similar sentiments with April:

*Satan is hated from the start. He has rebelled against the most-high God, and is therefore worthy of his punishment. While he and the other devils try to portray God as an unjust 'tyrant', the reader is always sceptical. Satan is the father of sin, and therefore not to be trusted. Moreover, Satan becomes more cruel and less majestic in every book. His rebellion, first motivated by jealousy of power, continues even when he knows all is hopeless for him purely out of a desire to do wrong in God's eyes (see his soliloquy in Book IV's opening). Consequently, he falls from an angel, to a devil, to a serpent, to chains.*

- Andrew

Andrew condemned Satan as the “primary culprit” of the Fall and would also only recommend *Paradise Lost* for others to read if they had a “sound knowledge of Christian theology”. He explained that he would not recommend it to someone without such a firm grasp of Christian theology, as it then becomes easy to misunderstand Milton's intentions and interpret it as a poem sympathising with Satan. For Andrew, maintaining the original message of the Bible is of paramount importance. Unlike Patrick Hume, who trusts in a reader’s ability to resist Satan’s temptations,<sup>8</sup> Andrew was less confident, explaining that as an “advanced reader”, he was well equipped to read *Paradise Lost* precisely because:

*Having read Genesis, I know which elements of Milton's story are his own invention or interpretation and which are straight from the Bible. Hence, I know that when God made the world 'it was very good' (1:31),<sup>9</sup> and that evil and suffering was only brought into the world via Satan's manipulation of mankind - not by a 'tyrant' God (Book I) who planned a Fall.*

- Andrew

Rachel, another Christian respondent, did not share this view and explained that she would “absolutely” recommend the “literary masterpiece” for others to read. Reflecting on Satan, the third-year undergraduate student wrote:

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<sup>8</sup> Patrick Hume, *Annotations on Milton's Paradise Lost* (London: Jacob Tonson, 1695). More detail on Hume’s response in relation to other scholars can be found in Leonard, p. 396.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew cites a verse from Genesis 1. 31: And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day. *The Bible: Authorised King James Version with Apocrypha*, eds. Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

*I was very intrigued by Satan but I didn't find this troubling as I can distinguish my religious beliefs from my literary interests. He is a particularly well-formed character and he is fascinating. Despite my interest in him I felt a sense of victory with his downfall in Book IX, perhaps this is a reflection of my belief.*

- Rachel

With Rachel separating the poem from her belief in religious scripture, it allowed her intrigue and appreciation for Satan's characterisation to register as unproblematic. Nonetheless, the feeling of "victory" she experienced during his downfall points to a moment where her religious beliefs and literary interests were unconsciously united in her readerprint. Differently, a conscious effect of religious beliefs colouring interpretations of Satan was made apparent to Natasha in her experience of reading the poem:

*I was certainly intrigued by Satan in Paradise Lost. I don't think I was ever really drawn to him yet this is complicated by the fact that I didn't find myself totally opposed to him. My prior knowledge that Satan is the epitome of evil meant that if I found myself being in any way drawn to him in Paradise Lost, I immediately drew back or just dismissed it. Ultimately, I didn't want to be feeling any sort of attraction to or sympathy towards Satan, so it did make me feel uncomfortable. I found that I was having this reaction at the start of the poem where Milton seems to be exploring the psychology of Satan or, the psychology of evil. I think that this delving into the psychology of Satan and allowing that platform for his rhetoric to be heard makes it almost inevitable for the reader to be drawn in by or to Satan in Paradise- regardless of whether they'd want to be or not. However, this feeling was quite quickly dispelled through the later books both during the lead up to and the Fall itself. I'd say this is*

*purely because his works of evil come fully into play and we see his intended destruction ensue. The points at which I had earlier felt perhaps, more drawn to Satan made more sense to me though because I was seeing his same powerful and convincing rhetoric draw in Eve as it had me, in the earlier books.*

- Natasha

Natasha described experiencing a loss of control in reading Satan, explaining that it was “inevitable” for a reader to feel drawn to the character “whether they’d want to be or not”. Reflecting as a Christian reader, she claimed that feeling drawn to the fallen figure ignited feelings of uneasiness as it conflicted with her religious understanding of Satan. Natasha navigated this discomfort by assuring herself that Satan’s powerful and persuasive oratorical skill was part of his insincere appeal. She reconciled the uncomfortable questions raised by *Paradise Lost* by appreciating that “Milton is demonstrating the complexity and depth of faith – that our faith and belief means nothing if it isn't challenged”. The poem was also highly appreciated, but seen as less challenging to Joseph, who did not feel discomfort in the same way:

*I like the Satan of Books 1 and 2 well enough, but even then only like I enjoy Shakespeare's Richard the Third. I guess I 'enjoy' rather than 'like' him. He's charismatic and interesting and delightfully wicked but I have never thought that he was right in any way. His reasoning is quite obviously specious to me, even wrapped up in rhetoric, and I can't see people quite 'falling for it' like Stanley Fish says they do. But then I have never felt oppressed by God or any church, so his characterisation of God as a tyrant never struck home for me, nor his want to rebel. And then once Satan is out and about in the world, he gradually becomes less sublime and his*

*reasoning falls apart even more. Which is a good depiction of evil! I will say, I am moved whenever Satan is overcome by the beauty of Eden or of Adam and Eve, because you feel redemption could be a possibility for him. But I see nothing noble when he shakes himself out of it and sticks to his self-destructive guns. Then, although his rhetoric is of course wonderful, his temptation of Eve is deeply repulsive. I always think about that line of the guilty serpent slinking away as an accurate depiction of what Satan has gradually become over the length of Paradise Lost.*

- Joseph

Joseph is a devout Christian who described himself as being “of God’s party”, recognising that Milton would have had to change the Genesis narrative quite radically for him to think that the Fall was fortunate in any way. Unlike Natasha, Joseph felt in control, and declared himself resistant to Satan’s rhetorical charm from the outset. These latter admissions from respondents Rachel, Natasha, and Joseph’s readerprints echo similar sentiments to some Muslimah participants who will be examined later in this chapter.

Timothy, a Christian male reader also enjoyed the poetic representation of Satan and found the character extraordinary:

*[...] I really don't know where to begin, but if I were to note my responses to passages in Paradise Lost that portray Satan's outward speech and inward thoughts, I just smile. I smile at his cleverness, his self-aware hypocrisy. But I am also moved by the desperation which is prevalent throughout. One of the most curious descriptions of Satan, I feel, is when he's compared to a tourist getting out of the city and going out into the countryside. It seems so incongruous and so prosaic a simile, yet it also works wonderfully: it's a comical nonchalance ("oh, I'm just popping out to the*



*countryside to bring about the Fall of Man") that serves to illustrate both his confidence in his own powers and also his total lack of sympathy for Adam and Eve. The variations in tone and gravity in descriptions of Satan are brilliant. I am not in any way disturbed by Satan, even though what he's capable of doing with language is indeed disturbing. In light of the questions about God the Father and God the Son, I do find Satan far more attractive, moving, and sympathetic than them. Perhaps this is because there is that uncertainty which I find to be the most attractive keynote of Milton's poetry from throughout his career.*

- Timothy

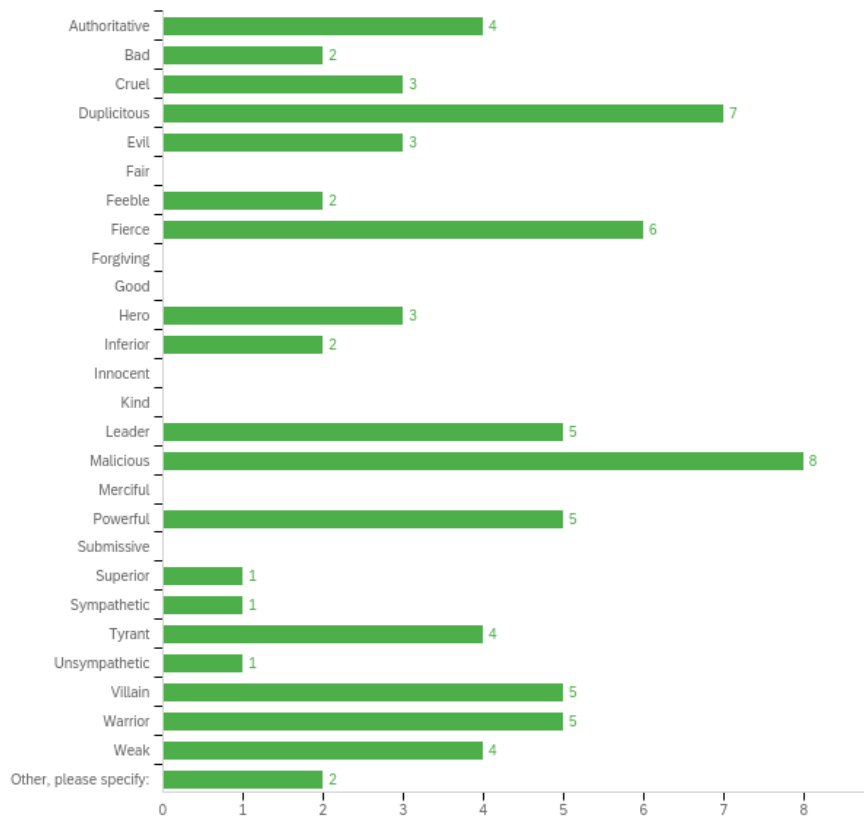
Interestingly, unlike April and Andrew, Timothy stated that he did not believe that the story of Genesis influenced his reading of the poem and would recommend it to others. Like April, Timothy did, however, share feelings of anger, albeit for different reasons.

*I certainly would [recommend the poem to others] - it's because it's so full of anger, especially the anger of not understanding. For example, Satan's fury stems from his not comprehending why the Son of God should be preferred above him. [...] The ability of Paradise Lost to make you question is the greatest appeal for me, active questioning rather than passive acceptance. And no one in Paradise Lost epitomises furious questioning (of authority, of our expectations, of so much!) than the character of Satan.*

- Timothy

For Christian participants in the study, where sympathy existed, it was reserved for moments where they felt the character of Satan was relatable to their own selves, or the human

condition. This emphasises the idea that for this sample group of Christian readers; relatability through identification was a necessary component required to view the character in a sympathetic light.

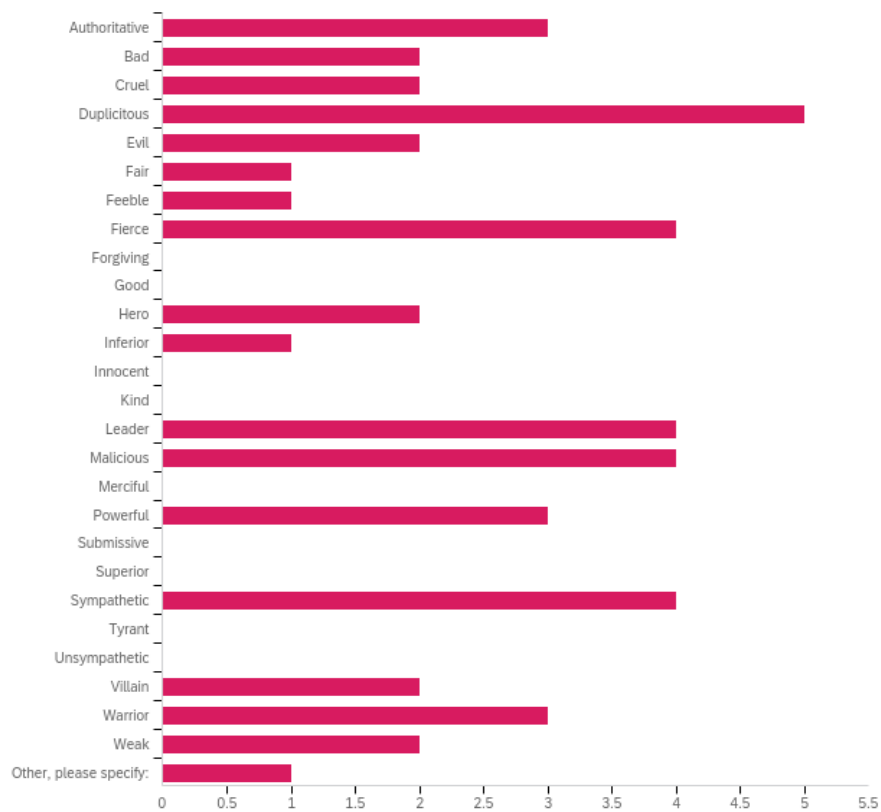


*Figure 1- Christian respondents associating words with Satan*

As displayed in the graph above, all the Christian participants were very conscious and critical of Satan’s misdeeds and were therefore hesitant to look upon him too kindly. For instance, when associating words with the character of Satan, the highest-ranking adjectives among this sample group of Christian respondents were “malicious” and “duplicitous”, whereas “sympathetic” and “superior” only received one vote each. However, with Timothy’s case, the favourable reaction towards Satan was not because he deemed the fallen

angel to be morally correct, but rather, as a reader, he relishes texts that confuse, frustrate, and force one to contemplate. On the other hand, the readerprints of more conservative Christians including Andrew and April were fused with unsympathetic feelings of disdain for the character as they perceived him in accordance with how they interpret Christian doctrine, regarding Satan as the emblem of evil, and originator of sin.

For participants who identified themselves as lapsed Christians, “duplicitous” still ranked highest, but interestingly, these respondents associated sympathy with the character far more:



*Figure 2 - Lapsed Christian respondents associating words with Satan*

With the lapsed Christian respondents, comments were largely sympathetic and more emotionally driven towards Satan. For example, Alison gave an analogy of a family, where Satan is imagined to be “a child who now has a younger sibling and cannot have the divided

attention of their caregivers”. Feeling empathetic towards Satan, Alison’s analogy gave the impression that Satan was petulant, arguing that his rebellion was entirely justified and understandable as he behaved in this manner simply because he ached for attention from God and “used bad actions just to be spoken to again”. This contrasts with those who regarded Satan as a highly motivated and evil being, as Alison downplayed him as a genuine threat. Other readers who identify as lapsed Christians have emphasised their exposure to Satan’s vulnerability which, when paralleled with the figure of God the Father, made them lean more towards Satan:

*I found Satan to be the most moving of all the characters along with Eve. As a reader we are let into Satan's vulnerable side and we can see the opposing forces at work within his character - the conflict within him - which is a relatable characteristic and one that encourages an attraction to Satan over God. Not only does Milton's portrayal of Satan lure us into favour his character but it pushes us further away from God. The first books of the poem strongly generate an attraction towards Satan but this intensity of feeling balances out the further into the poem you read, which also lessens the negative feelings towards God, leading one to consider both Satan and God more equally. Having said that, Satan still comes out on top for me.*

- Skyla

This echoes similarities with other participants in this sample group as they too report to have been drawn to Satan’s characterisation, and found it “nearly impossible not to be attracted” to the fallen figure’s rhetorical skill. Despite this, readers including Dawn expressed that this attraction is part of the test of readers “to resist his charms and find what is right in the poem”. Here, we have a form of Fish’s reader-response theory which highlights that Milton’s

procedure relies upon the reader's participation, humiliation, and education during the poem, where at first, one may feel convinced by the disgraced creature, but will eventually find wisdom in the end by realising otherwise.<sup>10</sup> This was also shared by Lucas who stated that his perception of the poem had changed overtime. Explaining that he was once a "young militant atheist", Lucas said that as he has now "settled into a more mature agnosticism with greater respect for religion", and has come to regard Satan's "superficial appeal" as more of a temptation for the fallen reader, whereas previously, he regarded Satan as the "true hero" of the poem. This is very intriguing as it is apparent that Lucas' changing religious affiliation – from atheism to agnosticism - has coloured his interpretation and thus shaped and changed his response over time. However, not all readers reach this same conclusion:

*I was very attracted to and sympathetic with Satan my first time reading Paradise Lost, and continue to feel similarly towards the character in my more recent readings of the epic. Satan seemed created to fail from the moment he was created. His rather selfish understandings of the unfairness of God's universe was certainly a self-centred one but highlighted a lot of the questions I asked myself as I found I was distancing myself from the Catholic Church.*

- Emma

In Emma's response, favourable feelings towards Satan were attached to her own lived experiences. Unlike Lucas, though she too identified as a lapsed Christian, she found herself relating more to the fallen figure with each read. Despite the differences, what seemed to be a commonality between most of the lapsed Christian respondents was their ability to see the good in Satan and sympathise, yet still scrutinise his behaviour:

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<sup>10</sup> Stanley Eugene Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (London: Macmillan, 1967).

*Satan is, as most critics recognise, an inherently attractive character: Milton's dedication to creating a powerful portrayal of the character is really something. His jealousy is off-putting, however - particularly his thoughts on Adam and Eve. They seem to somewhat diminish what appears to be an otherwise brilliant mind and strong leader. By the end of the poem, he is almost a shadow of his former self, in my view.*

- Clara

By contrast, for the Jewish respondents in the study, there was a lack of scrutiny for the character of Satan in *Paradise Lost*. Though this sample size was significantly smaller, the female Jewish participants expressed sympathy, and report to have felt moved by Satan's representation and perceived him to be more of a tragic hero:

*Satan as a character really moved me. Growing up, Satan was seen as an unmovable force of evil but Milton presented him almost human with flaws that led to his downfall. In the text, he never came across as evil but a tragic hero, whose own stubbornness and loyalty to his followers stopped him repenting. Satan showed a range of self-doubt and emotion (especially in book 4) which made me sympathetic towards him. It made him more human and relatable unlike God the Father. His character developed throughout the epic poem and he showed himself as a more fair ruler with a council of demons/followers voting on Hell's response to being damned, allowing differing opinions to be expressed then acting what was voted on not matter what.*

- Miryam

For Ruth, another Jewish respondent, Milton’s presentation of Satan had a similar effect:

*I found Satan an attractive character and this turned into sympathy the more I read of the poem. I think I felt this way because he was relatable in the fact that he had been led astray, attracted to glory and was now learning the consequences (although I don't think he felt bad about what he'd done).*

- Ruth

Despite this, as shown in Figure 3 below, when it came to reflecting on words associated with Satan, the small sample of Jewish participants in the study still selected words including “duplicitous” and “bad”, though there was a noticeable absence of words such as “villain” and “cruel”, to name a few:

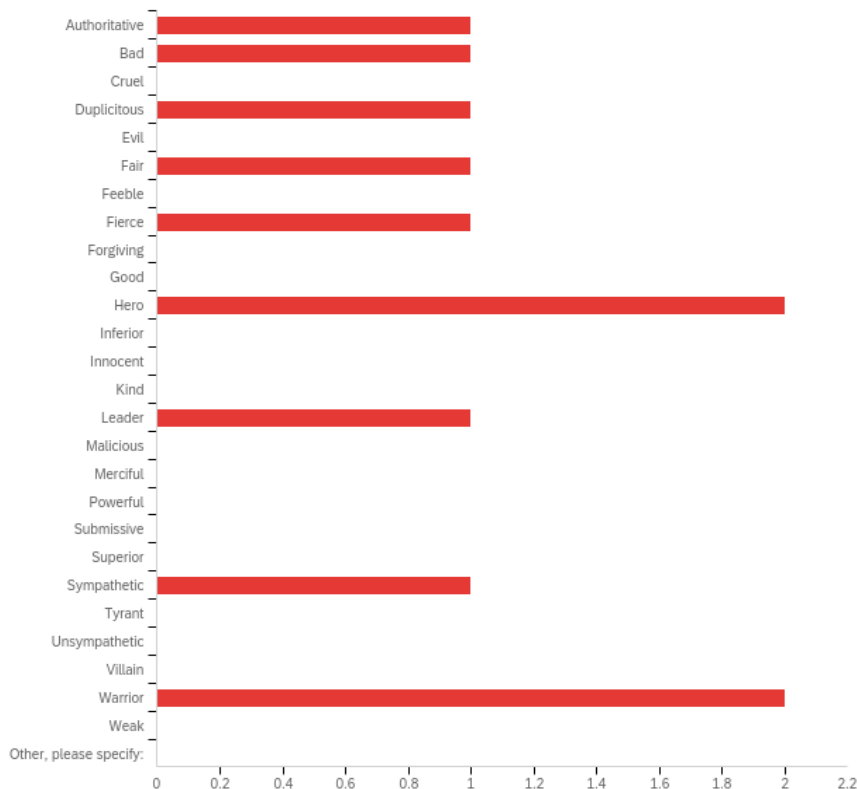


Figure 3- Jewish respondents associating words with Satan

Miryam, explained that as a Reform Jew, she was encouraged by her synagogue to think of new ways of re-evaluating works to learn from, adapt and apply to daily life.<sup>11</sup> She used this approach when reading *Paradise Lost*, and internalised lessons to “be aware of manipulation and the power of knowledge”. In the case of Milton’s Satan, Miryam confessed to having questioned what she believed in, and cautioned that she would only recommend the poem to others “depending on how open their mind is as it presents a large range of troubling thoughts regarding your own faith”. Ruth also acknowledged the differences Milton’s Satan had to the figure she had been taught about in her religious studies and found this problematic. Nonetheless, both Jewish readers enjoyed Milton’s imaginative take on Satan and perceived *Paradise Lost* and Genesis as stories that they appreciated.

With there being no religious affiliations for atheist respondents in the study, the initial assumption was that they would be more likely to look more favourably upon Satan’s characterisation than their peers. Though this was certainly the case for some, it was not a shared impression amongst this group of readers. Rather, for most atheist respondents in the online questionnaire, they shared that their feelings towards Satan were “complex”. As displayed in Figure 4 below, though readers perceived Satan to be “duplicitous”, a lesser proportion regarded him to be “evil” or “bad”. This highlighted that duplicity was distinctly different from, and not necessarily synonymous with evil for many of the readers. What was perhaps most striking to note from this sample group was how split the categorisations were when perceiving Satan to be either a “hero” or “villain”:

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Reform Judaism’ – The religious movement with the aim of reinterpreting (or ‘reforming’) Judaism in the light of Western thought, values, and culture where such a reinterpretation does not come into conflict with Judaism’s basic principles. Oxford Reference, *Reform Judaism* (2023) <<https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100410600;>> [accessed 12 October 2022].



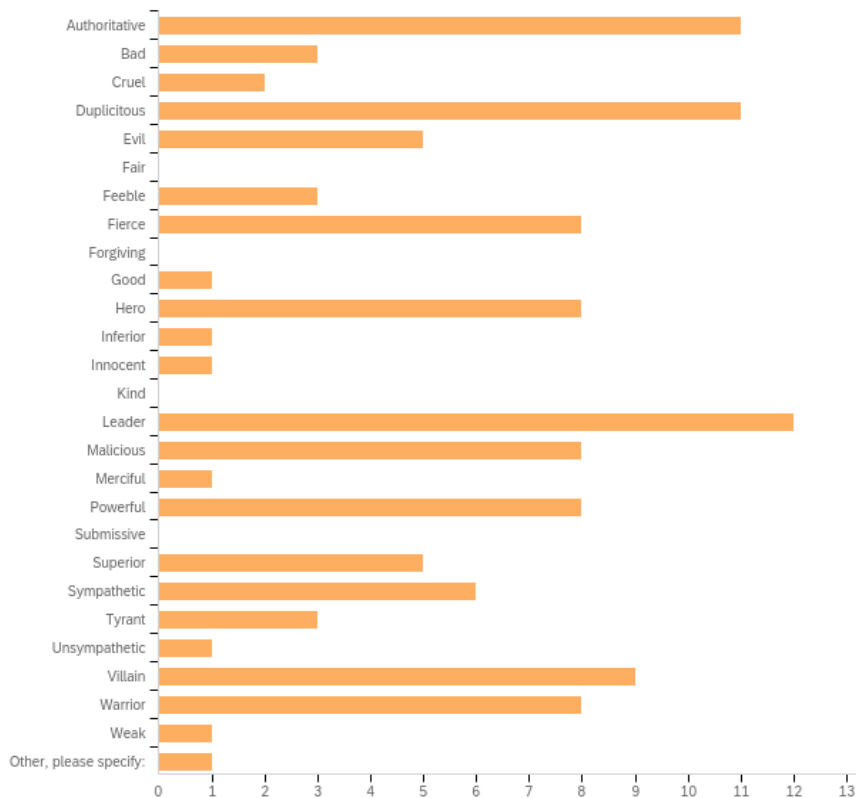


Figure 4- Atheist respondents associating words with Satan

Though “villain” ranked marginally higher, several of the atheist respondents connected themselves with the Romantic tradition.

*I find the character of Satan as the most compelling (alongside the character of Eve). I instantly aligned myself with the idea that ‘Milton was of the devil’s party’ in the text. Satan’s introduction in book 1 undermines any later attempt to criticise his actions or justify God’s. His endeavours seem heroic, his motivations just, his language convincing. There is the argument that the reason he is so persuasive and sympathetic is to show our own fallen state as readers: we ‘fall’ for the devil as our Edenic parents also did. Whatever the reason, as a modern, secular reader, the religious arguments don’t hold much weight for me personally. Instead the language*

*reveals to me a noble figure who seeks to improve the lot of him and his compatriots. I love the moment when on seeing Eve he falters and questions his whole mission. I love that he accepts the evil of his mission. He is the ultimate anti-hero. Complex, erudite, sexy, flawed, determined character, beguiling... He is so much more interesting than Adam, the Father, the Son that I do think it would be problematic for a more religious person to read the text comfortably, although Milton does make some watery concessions throughout to try to undermine some of his enigmatic grandeur.*

- Jane

Jane's fascination and love for Milton's presentation of Satan is further understood when she revealed that as a non-religious reader, she perceived the story of Genesis as a "fairy tale that has caused lots of misery and has justified generations of cruelty". Reflecting on this attitude, Jane explained that as she has gotten older, more critical, and angry at "the world's dogmatic adherence to religion in the age of science", she found the multidimensional narrative of *Paradise Lost* an effective antidote. Through this remedy, where she described Satan as "beguiling", "noble", "enigmatic", "flawed", and "fascinating", for Jane's rebellious readerprint, Satan was truly a fresh breath of hot air.

Also connecting with the Romantic tradition, Jack wrote:

*Who isn't attracted to Satan?! I very much take the Romantic view of seeing Satan as the hero of PL and even though he is conceited and deceptive egotist, his soaring rhetoric and fantastically demonic lines just make him too interesting and entertaining to simply dislike. It is the way he is so tortured that brilliantly justifies his demonic ways and give him the heroic status I think he is deserving of. Within*

*him, Milton is able to really explore the perversions of free will and pride and the way these become so distorted under tyrannical rule.*

- Jack

Like Jane, Jack adopted an anti-establishment view of the poem and explained that as a default, he was preconditioned to perceive Satan favourably at the expense of God the Father. However, unlike Jane, Jack pointed out that his understanding of the Genesis story was very much “tainted” by a background awareness of *Paradise Lost*. Both readers were also unique in commenting on the sexual depiction of Satan. Drawing on these allusions in the poem, Jack observed that Satan offered a very interesting reading on the fetishisation of violence as “he is obsessed with revenge and death and, as the devil, adores violence”. Jack pointed out that as a male reader, it was extra fascinating to consider this way of reading, illustrating how for him, considering the part played by his gender was an active point of deliberation in his mind. Commenting further on the politics in the poem, Clara reported that because she is not religious, she did not relate to the idea of unquestionable faith or deference to a religious figure and stressed that even *if* Satan is evil, his desire for “a system based on meritocracy and not tradition should not be condemned”. Clara viewed Satan heroically, arguing that the fallen angel “liberates the humans from ignorance”. Though meritocracy is perhaps not the unalloyed good that Clara thinks it is, and the situation is far more complicated than how she describes, her response does raise an important point about the quality of the readings offered by the respondents in this study. We must remember that these readers are not operating at the level of critics and are mostly students who have encountered the epic in seminar context. Participants’ interpretations will therefore be reflective of this.

The poem incited intrigue for another atheist participant who also viewed Satan positively in her readerprint:

*Satan is by far the most interesting and sympathetic character found within Paradise Lost and becomes more so the more you read: he is certainly the most attractive character. The language of his speeches is tantalizing and from the moment he first speaks in the first book, you are hooked. He is self-reflective when he discusses his own fall and is the most well-developed, three-dimensional character in the book. He is fully aware of the complexities and contradictions in his actions [...] 'Which way I flie is Hell; my self am Hell; And in the lowest deep a lower deep Still threatening to devour me opens wide.' - This description of internal torment and sense of claustrophobia is something I feel we can all identify with. During his temptation speech with Eve, I found myself willing him to succeed and relishing every twist and turn of his language, similar to how you feel as an audience member in a play when you know where the plot is going, but you're just waiting for it to happen.*

- Penelope

The dramatic irony that Penelope refers to reinforces the idea that readers respond to Satan in a dualistic way. Though aware of the character's "complexities", Milton's stylistic choice to equip Satan with powerful, "tantalizing" speeches meant that Penelope was able to identify with, and therefore, relate to the character, thus igniting feelings of sympathy and attraction. Despite this, while Penelope wished for Satan's success, Laura found herself pitying the character:

*I initially had a grudging respect for Satan who, fought against what he saw as tyrannical authority, lost everything for it and yet built himself his own kingdom. I was first drawn to Paradise Lost when coming across the line, "Better to reign in hell*

*than serve in Heaven" in a YA novel - so was perhaps predisposed to like his character. However, as we watch Satan's power as a ruined archangel diminish, I felt a lot of pity for his fallen state. When his pomposity is revealed and the other angels can't recognise him while he whispers in Eve's ear, the character suddenly became very human to me. Subsequently, when he returns to hell in Book 10 - all his cohort turned to serpents - I am always slightly horrified by the humiliation Milton piles on him, justified though it may be. However, it also seems fitting - Satan is irrelevant as humankind can decide their fate- still, I pity him at the end.*

- Laura

This predisposition to liking Satan's character was also noted by Samantha, who was initially "shocked" at feeling sympathy for him, but recognised the part played by popular culture and representations of the devil figure in the media that "present him as a complex, emotional being like ourselves". Other readers including Jasmine were impressed with Satan's "heroic qualities", namely through Raphael's narration of the war in Heaven, but note that some moments in the poem highlighted him "as a figure that dwells in self-pity". Despite these readers feeling sympathy and drawn to Milton's Satan, there were some atheist readers who did not share this view and were unconvinced by his behaviour in their critique:

*I think Satan is a fascinating and charismatic character, but I'm not fooled by him! As much as he is compelling, Milton shows us that he's not what he seems to be: he's a liar, he farts a lot, and he's actually quite pathetic. I see a lot of Doctor Faustus in Satan; the reader sees all his anguish and knows that all he needs to do is ask God for forgiveness, but he cannot. I love how Milton's representation of Satan's experiences conflates mind and body and landscape - the extreme environments of hell*

*manifesting his intemperate nature, and the monistic hardening of his angelic body. I think Milton's incredibly creative and multifaceted expression of Satan's character is what makes it so curious and intriguing.*

- Simone

Though it is not in fact true that Satan “farts a lot” in the poem, it is fascinating to observe how Simone has imagined this concept to emphasise her admission of Satan as an unattractive and pathetic being. In Angelina’s observation, Satan was “largely unsympathetic as his rebellion stems from discontent against God”. However, she found Eve’s disobedience to gain knowledge far more interesting than Satan’s, which was to gain power. While Simone and Angelina expressed certainty, Tanya remained ambivalent:

*I am very unsure about the character of Satan throughout the whole poem. It seemed at first glance, that he was a despotic leader with little care for the effects of his actions. When he enters the garden and appears to regret his actions, I am more inclined to sympathise with him. However, in the back of my mind, I am aware Satan knows how to play on God's omniscience and thus knows He would be watching him.*

- Tanya

With readerprints such as Jane’s and Clara’s being informed by their resistance to religious ways of thinking, other atheist readers understandably disassociated with religion completely and approached the poem objectively and as a work that is purely fictional. For the most part, the atheist respondents in the study typically looked favourably upon the fallen figure of Satan and rationalised their thoughts by either aligning themselves with the Romantic tradition, or viewed the narrative through a lens of overcoming tyranny and political power.

In the absence of this, for other atheist respondents in the study, Satan was viewed sympathetically through feelings of emotional relatability which was something they shared with their peers who identified with a religion. However, this was not an agreed consensus for all, as clearly, some of the atheist participants remained unsure, unmoved, or not fooled by the fallen figure at all.

Now that the comparative sample of respondents has been analysed, finally, we turn to the Muslim participants of this reception study. Before conducting fieldwork, my initial assumption was that Muslim readers would be more likely to disfavour the representation of Satan in *Paradise Lost* than their peers. Due to the narrative in the Qur'anic story of creation and the religious significance of the devil figure of Shaythaan/Iblees in Islam, I was conscious of the possibility that Muslim readers may feel a sense of discomfort in reading a tale where the figure of Satan could be sympathised with, and potentially placed above God morally. For many practising Muslims, the innate battle a believer has in resisting Iblees' temptations and choosing a path of righteousness is a daily trial. This is reflected in the Qur'anic verse:

If Satan should prompt you to do something, seek refuge with God – He is all hearing, all knowing – those who are aware of God think of Him when Satan prompts them to do something and immediately they can see [straight]; the followers of devils are led relentlessly into error by them and cannot stop.

(Qur'an 7: 200-202)

Verses such as these where one is warned against the whispers of the devil are common knowledge to the average practising Muslim as the figure of Shaythaan/Iblees has huge religious significance. This is acknowledged in Awan's study, where Milton's representation

of Satan was a cause for concern for Muslim lecturers in Pakistani universities. Awan warned that due to the conflict in religious beliefs, tutors may find difficulty in teaching Satan as they stated that he was designed to challenge the authority of God and can thus be deemed as objectionable and blasphemous.<sup>12</sup> However, I had an entirely different reaction from British Muslimahs in my own study, where more than half of these respondents seemed to favour Milton's representation of Satan for various reasons.

*I found Satan a very interesting character in the story. This is due to his lack of characterisation in the Islamic faith (he is often portrayed as evil, but not complex), whereas I found Milton's depiction of him complex, interesting and moving. I did not sympathise with him, but was able to appreciate the poetic depiction of his arrogance. He is victimised at the beginning of the poem, which caused me to feel sympathetic toward him at first, but the more evil his character envelops, the more I felt distant from him. I felt there was a sense of humanising Satan at the beginning. This reminded me of a book called The Tragedy of Iblis - a minority of sufi works are dedicated to portrayed Satan as a victim of arrogance, as opposed to the symbol of arrogance.*

- Manal

I categorise Manal, a British-Indian participant aged 27, as a 'cultural accommodator' through her practice of mediating between cultures in her readings. Here, she directly compared both the Islamic tradition with the Miltonic, and made a valuable distinction between sympathising and appreciating Satan. Manal seemed to favour Milton's creative

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<sup>12</sup> Mahe Nau Munir Awan (2012), 'When Muslims Read Milton: An Investigation of the Problems Encountered by Teachers and Students in a Sample of British and Pakistani Universities' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Surrey), p. 192.



poetic depiction of the creature as it allowed her to add another dimension to her Islamic and Sufi understanding of the Satan's arrogance.<sup>13</sup> Unlike some of the Jewish and Christian respondents reviewed earlier, instead of being taken aback by the differences, Manal welcomed them and was able to find similarities with minority Sufi works, allowing them to inform her understanding of Milton's creative choice. She was thus able to systematically compartmentalise Satan's behaviour and used it to track her own changing perception towards him. However, it is important to note that not all Muslimah readers have the same exposure and interest to religious scripture and tradition and may not make the same interpretive connections and leaps. Another Muslimah; British-Bengali reader Hana, aged 24, voluntarily compared both the Islamic and Miltonic depictions of Shaythan and Satan and wrote:

*Satan is brought to life in Paradise Lost. He is cunning, evil, but also heroic. Reading the epic, did not change my religious beliefs regarding Satan. It did, however, indicate the sheer skill of Milton as poet. A writer who depicts the human qualities of the most evil. I also do not think it deviates that much from Islamic belief. In the beginning Satan was the most loved creature of God. His fault was his pride, an aspect we see throughout Paradise Lost. Satan's story in the Qur'an is there to teach humans about the problems with pride - a very human quality.*

- Hana

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<sup>13</sup> 'Sufi' – is a term used to refer to one of a sect of Muslim ascetic mystics who in later times embraced pantheistic views. See 'Sufi, in *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online], <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/193615>> [accessed 23 February 2023]. The minority work that Manal refers to argues that in Sufi writer's attempts to understand the nature of evil, they developed a complex and nuanced psychological understanding of Iblis. Through this, Iblis' rebellion is not considered as a sign of his evil nature, but rather, is seen as a necessary step in God's divine plan of creation and redemption. For more information, see: Peter J. Awn, *Satan's Tragedy and Redemption: Iblis in Sufi Psychology*, ed. by M. Heerma Van Voss, E. J. Sharpe and R. J. Z. Werblowsky (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1983).

Interestingly, as Hana complimented Milton's depiction of Satan while sharing similarities between both narratives, she also assured us that her own religious beliefs were not at all affected. This contrasts to another Muslim respondent, this time, Preethi, a Bangladeshi student studying in Canada, who admitted that she found herself in an uncomfortable position due to the poem inducing in the reader a "moral dilemma" as it gave rise to doubt about where a reader's "loyalties lie". Remarkably, in Hana's questionnaire contribution, she explicitly stated that she did not believe that her religious nor her cultural beliefs and attitudes had shaped her understanding and reading of *Paradise Lost*. Yet, in the same questionnaire, she voluntarily made continuous comparisons between the Miltonic and Qur'anic traditions. As researcher, I would also categorise Hana as a 'cultural accommodator', though perhaps a reluctant one, as she clearly perceives herself as more of an 'objectivist' thinker. Nonetheless, Hana was indeed an interesting case study, whose response we will explore further when looking at her response to the character of Eve.

Like Hana, Mariyah also drew upon her understanding on the figure of Shaythan in the Islamic tradition:

*Satan was such an interesting character, especially in the first book. I was attracted to his character because of his leadership skills and his mobilising of the other devils/angels. But this attraction changed as his actions became sneaky and he had a desire to overthrow Paradise. I think that my sympathy for him in the beginning is due to my understanding of God's mercy and power, and of the very basic understanding that Satan used to be God's best 'worker' so to see this figure in Islam become characterised in this poem made him more relatable.*

- Mariyah

The Islamic tradition that Hana and Mariyah refer to is the belief that before refusing to follow God's direct command to obey him and prostrate to Adam, Shaythan/Iblis was in fact a loved, and dutiful servant of Allah. Didactically, this message implores Muslims to remember that even those closest to God can lose their way. When paralleled with the Miltonic story, then, if Muslim readers did find themselves feeling drawn, or sympathetic towards Satan, the Islamic foreknowledge of his character arc may encourage them to remember his changing and declining spiritual and moral state. As many of the participants from the wider sample noted, for them, Satan was at first, appealing and sympathetic, but later grew reprehensible and into his own monstrosity. This is affirmed by another participant I regard a 'cultural accommodator', British-Kashmiri Muslimah, Ansar, aged 25, who observed:

*At the start of the story, Milton really builds Satan's character and I can see how sympathy is felt for him as we see the story from his perspective through his persuasive words. He is able to be a good public speaker and lead the fallen angels but by the end Satan's form is the opposite as his degraded self as a snake. I found that Satan was a charismatic character with great power of words who seemed to have intentions that were pure. However, I was unsympathetic to his fall as I felt it was a result of his pride. Some may feel as though God was harsh but there was deliberation and cunning in his behaviour which not only impacted himself but others.*

- Ansar

Like Hana, Ansar's mention of pride is significant here as pride is understood as Shaythan/Iblis's fatal flaw in Islam:

When We told the angels, ‘Bow down before Adam,’ they all bowed. But not Iblis, who refused and was arrogant: he was disobedient.

(Qur’an 2: 34)

We created you, We gave you shape, and then We said to the angels, ‘Bow down before Adam,’ and they did. But not Iblis: he was not one of those who bowed down. God said, ‘What prevented you from bowing down and I commanded you?’ and he said, ‘I am better than him: You created me from fire and him from clay.’ God said, ‘Get down from here! This is no place for your arrogance. Get out! You are contemptible!’

(Qur’an 7: 11-13)

In Islamic understanding, the figure of the devil was not guilty of doubting God’s power, but rather, he was guilty of arrogance through the disobeying of the God’s direct command. Though given the opportunity to turn back to Him, Iblees did not, and thus continued the offence of pride. Ansar carried nuances from her Islamic interpretation which saw that pride was also the defining and damning characteristic for Satan in *Paradise Lost*. Delving deeper into her analysis, when asking Ansar further questions during an in-person interview, she revealed that she recalled the seminars discussing Satan the most and remembered people feeling quite sympathetic towards him. Later, Ansar admitted to not wanting certain characters, including Satan, to be portrayed in the ways that they were:

Eva: I’m so impressed, you studied this so long ago, but you still remember.

Ansar: Ha, yeah! It's a text that sticks with you. Satan as well, you know, at the start he's so charismatic. As a reader, being from a religious background, you do feel sorry for him, and that's not something I would particularly want.

Eva: Ah, so it's kind of like dangerous territory, would you say... to feel something for someone so iconically bad?

Ansar: I don't think that I did feel sorry for him, because I think I'm quite strong in religious belief. But I didn't like what they were trying to do, if that makes sense? So... it didn't fool me, is what I'm saying.

Eva: For the record, she is winking. [both laugh]

-Excerpt from interview with Ansar

This interview exchange highlights a significant shift when considering the responses of British Muslimahs in comparison to their peers. For instance, with Ansar, there was a recognition that Satan's characterisation was somewhat attractive or relatable, however, she made it very clear that her religious observance had made her resistant to his charms. Through Ansar's non-verbal cue of winking, she comfortably, and light-heartedly reassured her Muslim observer that her core beliefs were unshaken.

For British-Pakistani Muslimah Sannah, aged 25, a classmate of Ansar's and another participant I would deem a 'cultural accommodator', Satan was described as:

*Attractive in his wiliness. Unwavering in his ambition, in his lonely quest through both physical and personal chaos. Powerful in his oratory, fearful in his success.*

*Dangerous and subtly manipulative in his guile and deceit. Comparable to God the Father in his destruction of mankind, yet more active in his pursuit of it. Desperate. Naive, or foolishly brave against the combined power of God the Father and God the Son. Jealous, envious, hurt. A puppet of God slithering through God's predetermined plan? A single, solitary serpent- self-reliant-, orchestrating and revelling in the fall of himself and others. Milton's catalyst for change.*

- Sannah

Through Sannah's unique rhetorical style, it is interesting to observe how she chose to speak using epithets rather than reporting a response of her own. The absence of possessive pronouns distanced it from her own personal response, and instead posed each statement to read as a universal, and unquestionable fact. In her brilliant description, Sannah understood the portrayal of the "solitary serpent" without judgement and listed his qualities and effects on the reader. The only notable deviation from her model was the insertion of a single question mark: "A puppet of God slithering through God's predetermined plan?". Here, Sannah questioned the point of view of others, and wondered whether this line of thinking was correct. As she reserved judgement, her openness and willingness to read the text on its own terms is something that compliments her classification as a 'cultural accommodator', which is exemplified by her rhetorical style. Clearly conscious of Satan's multifaceted depiction, Sannah was asked to elaborate on her interpretation further, she shared:

Sannah: I feel... I feel as if it's a powerful poem and it makes me question things that are slightly uncomfortable. I think that's what makes it powerful for me. One of the things I had slight trouble with, even though I admire the character so much, is that character of Satan and the idea of aligning with that character. I think from a Muslim

perspective, that is intriguing, and it was unsettling. I mean, when I read it, I was also part of the Islamic Society so it was very very much at the forefront of everything I was doing within that year. And then I was reading this book alongside it and it was JARRING... and confusing but it was gripping in the same sense! And it appealed on a completely other level than just the identity, which is what made me keep reading it. And one of the things- I think I said it in my questionnaire, that was unsettling was you don't relate or identify or side with the character of God, and I found that troubling as well. I think the fact that I found so many troubling things within myself in reaction to the text, that's what made me love it more. It made me question things and – I wouldn't say that I'm not someone that questions myself, but I rarely do it with a text... if that even makes sense. When I usually react to a text, I normally react to its characters, its themes, its plot... but it doesn't make me question my core beliefs and I think that's why I was so jarred by it and probably why it's one of the most memorable texts that we've studied and not many make us do that. I don't know if it's because, essentially, it has a religious aspect, and a lot of texts that I studied in my undergrad and MA didn't... I think that's maybe why it touched home a bit. Maybe it was that, or maybe it was just the fact that it was just an epic text! Because it had those characters and in my core beliefs, I don't believe in, kind of... creating those characters and maybe even reading literature that portrays them. But then straight after this, it made me rethink what I read and I ended up reading *His Dark Materials* after that and that's a text that has all these same questions and portrayals. I think it opened my mind a little.

-Excerpt from interview with Sannah

Intriguingly, “jarring” was the same adjective Christian respondent April used to describe her reaction to the poem. The notion of discomfort that Sannah mentioned was also predicted by Jane, a non-religious reader who explained that if she was religious and found God to be “presented as such a tyrannical nightmare” whilst Satan was an alluring and “inspirational being”, she too would struggle. As a devout Muslim who was also a committee member of her University’s Islamic Society at the time, the powerful imprint that *Paradise Lost* left on Sannah is clear as she explained that she had to find a way to actively navigate her core beliefs in her day-to-day life whilst studying the poem. In order to control this, Sannah stated that she tried to interact with the plot and review the characters through a literary, contextual and narrative lens, more than a religious one. Similarly, for 23-year old Muslimah Alya, who is of Scottish and Pakistani decent, Satan also gave rise to feelings of discomfort. Alya falls under the category of an ‘objectivist’, as she generally aims to disregard her own background and instead ask: “What was the writer’s cultural and religious background? What cultural and religious background are their intended readers?”. Despite this being her default mindset, she confessed to have found *Paradise Lost* troublesome as she struggled to disassociate her own religious perception from the poem:

*I think my understanding of the story of creation in the Qur’an has influenced my reading of Paradise Lost mostly in the way I had trouble reading Milton’s Satan. I found it off-putting that his Satan was key in creating distinctions between what is false and what is true. Milton presents him as a character who is psychologically motivated and is given voice in the text; arguably, despite over 100 references to him in the Qur’an, Satan is silenced.*

- Alya



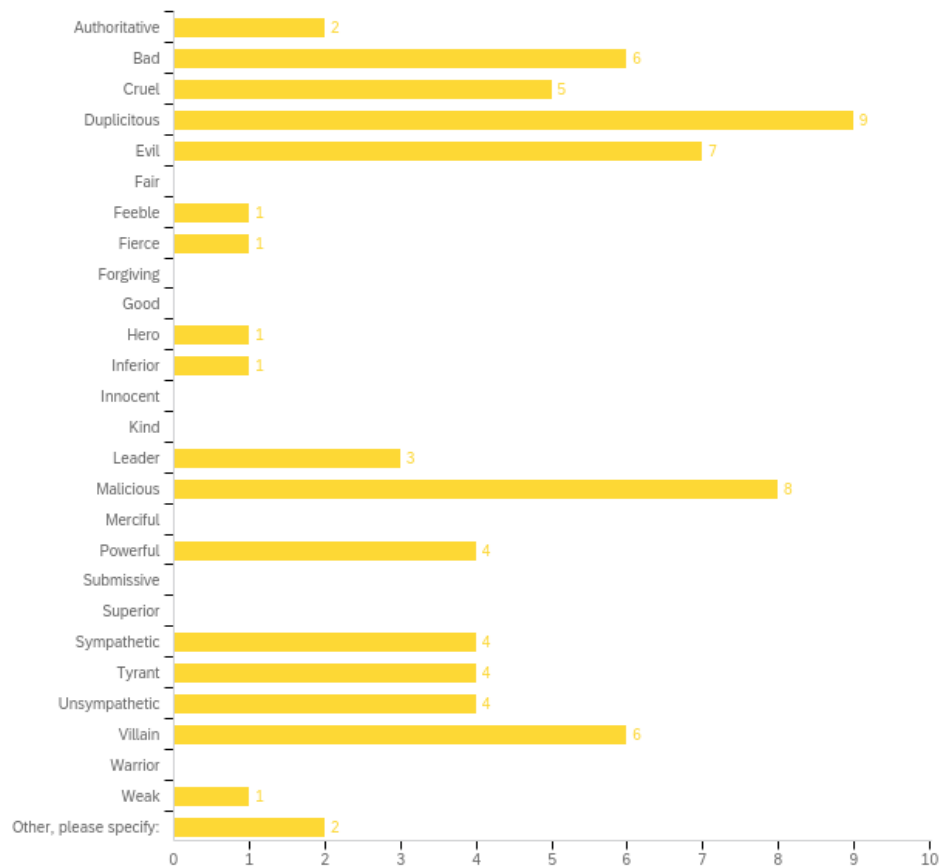
This was further examined in person during our in-person interview, where I asked:

Eva: As a Muslim, are there any parts of *Paradise Lost* that make you feel uncomfortable?

Alya: Mostly the representation of Satan. Because it seems wrong to read the poem and be like, oh actually he's got a point but no! Because he's Satan and he shouldn't have a point! [both laugh]

-Excerpt from interview with Alya

It is clear, then, that for these Muslimah participants, their unique cultural and religious formations did indeed colour their perceptions of Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost*. A fascinating finding of this group of participants has been to see the conflation between the Qur'anic and Miltonic narratives, though each do have their distinct differences. In comparison to the wider sample, these women were far less sympathetic. Instead, the dominant impression was that Satan was a charismatic and powerful orator. However, if sympathy was ever felt for the fallen figure, it was usually during the beginning of the narrative, which quickly diminished as he committed to the path of destruction. This is reflected in the words associated with Satan by the Muslim participants:



*Figure 5- Muslim respondents associating words with Satan*

As displayed in Figure 5, “duplicitious”, “malicious”, and “evil” ranked highest among female Muslim readers; while “sympathetic” and “hero” scored significantly lower; and “innocent” and “good” received nil votes. It is evident that in contrast to other readers who more frequently referenced relatability (through identification) as a reason for finding Satan appealing, the Muslimah participants delved deeper and were more likely to differentiate between finding relatability with the character and feeling appreciation for the artistic portrayal. This suggests that due to each of their religious compositions, the Muslimah respondents were more likely to exhibit resistance in being “fooled” by Satan and were not convinced by his actions.

Akin to Muslim participants who regarded pride as Satan's fatal flaw, Nusayba, a 26-year-old mother of two who comes from a British biracial Pakistani and Egyptian background, used the word "arrogant" to describe the fallen-figure. When sharing details of her background, Nusayba explained that she grew up in a very religious household and stopped practising Islam for a period of time. However, after marrying a convert to Islam in later years, she and her husband identified with more Salafi interpretations of Islam.<sup>14</sup> This was useful to know, as it was clear that Nusayba's religious and cultural formation had indeed coloured her readerprint. It is for this reason that I categorise Nusayba as 'the conformist', as her understanding of *Paradise Lost* was heavily influenced by her identification, which prompted her to speak and see things in a religious light:

Nusayba: When I first read the text, and I'd read a few pieces of what people were saying about it, how Satan was seen as an amazing figure... that's another point that I would say that made me a bit sceptical about the text.

Eva: Did you not see him as an amazing figure?

Nusayba: Obviously, because with my religion, Satan is a tempter, he tempts you to do sin, so for him to be seen as amazing is weird. But then again, that sort of prodded me to say well that's only poetic language. And when I took the religion aspect out of it, in the sense of him saying this is what happened... how the hell is he going to know what happened in the heavens? It doesn't make sense!

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<sup>14</sup> Salafi - a member of a strictly orthodox Sunni Muslim sect advocating a return to the early Islam of the Qur'an and their understanding of the Sunnah (traditions and practices of the Prophet Muhammad). See 'Salafi' in *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online], <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/271559>> [accessed 23 February 2023].

-Excerpt from interview with Nusayba (1)

Nusayba claimed that she was able to disassociate Satan with the Islamic figure of Shaythan/Iblees precisely because Milton's characterisation simply did not make sense to her. Though this was the case, this dissociation was what helped her appreciate Satan and still find the character interesting, albeit with the paradoxes he posed in her mind:

Nusayba: When came to Satan, I don't see him as the same figure

Eva: You kind of disassociate and can compartmentalise?

Nusayba: Yeah, definitely. And also, looking into the actual Bible itself and the Genesis story, there's not a lot of information there. A lot of this IS, Milton.

-Excerpt from interview with Nusayba (2)

However, despite efforts to separate the two figures and find "loopholes" in Milton's narrative, Nusayba was quick to make constant comparisons with the Islamic narrative in her critique of the poem:

Nusayba: If you were to generally tell the story [of *Paradise Lost*] about Satan having the ability to go back, away from Hell, when he was never to leave hell, like how did he do that?!

Eva: Valid point.

Nusayba: How was he given that power to do that?! How was he given the power to war against the God? Like that was a weird thing for me in fact, because the whole idea of there being paintings over it, of God and Satan warring – it makes no sense! Because essentially, in Islam, God can click His fingers – He doesn't even have to click His fingers! Not that we know if He has any fingers [Eva laughing] ... but you know, like He just needs to say it as it *is* and Satan shouldn't EVER be able to come out of that.

-Excerpt from interview with Nusayba (3)

Nusayba's resistance to the character of Satan's charm and appeal was different to the other Muslimah readers. While the other Muslimahs tended to have more of an emotional response to the poem, Nusaybah was more inclined to approach the narrative and critique the character of Satan logically. Evidently however, though she stated that she was able to disassociate and compartmentalise both the narratives, in the case of considering Satan, it became clear that she could not. For Nusaybah, turning to the Islamic narrative, which made more logical sense to her, and comparing it to the "loopholes" she found in the poem, was a way in which she reconciled with the text and found comfort in discomfort of *Paradise Lost*.

This was starkly different to 26-year-old British-Pakistani Muslim reader, Riya, who found that applying her cultural and religious background was unhelpful and hindered her understanding the text.

*At first I believed that my religious background has shaped what I knew about the fall, the events at the Garden of Eden and the dissent from Satan himself. In my first*

*reading, I applied those teachings and found myself unimpressed as I gathered nothing from the book other than the events of the Fall. On my rereads, however, I was able to put aside my knowledge on these matters and simply read Paradise Lost for what it was, a book. As such, I was able to spot the nuances that laud Paradise Lost as the greatest piece of British literature.*

- Riya

This was particularly interesting given my interview with Riya's tutor who stressed the importance of disregarding and putting aside personal beliefs when reading the poem. Drawing on the personality type of Riya herself, I categorise the northern reader as 'the contrarian' as she had a tendency to change her opinion and presented herself as someone with opposing and more mature views to the rest of her class. In the case of considering her reaction to Satan in particular, Riya revealed in her questionnaire response:

*[...] He is sympathetic simply because he displays the natures and emotions that a typical human may have. Jealousy, envy, righteousness, freedom. Although these may not necessarily be good traits and whilst I am constantly reminded on why Satan is a bad character, I could not help but be charmed by him as the poem progressed. His points when he was manipulating his fellow angels are valid as they point out how difficult it is to speak out against God and that Pandemonium has something that God does not provide, a democracy. Where each and every person has a right to speak and to question. Satan is a character that is manipulative and calculative, yet the way he is written as humanely as possible made me become impressed with his ideas and how he has executed them. Particularly on how he was able to enter into the Garden. I have, when discussing Satan as a character, raised a point on what the possible*

*reason for becoming so sympathetic to Satan's character is, for me; watching TV shows like Lucifer and Bad Omens, reading regressive character arcs such as Anakin Skywalker (Star Wars), Tom Riddle (Harry Potter), Eren Jaeger (Attack on Titan) and Macbeth (Shakespeare) and also engaging with world in general such as becoming aware of true crime. This has allowed me to become so desensitized by the thought of the devil himself that Satan in comparison does not seem at all bad. For me, when I look at crime and how horrific and needless they are in the real world and compare it to Satan in Paradise Lost, Satan is written more humanely than when I first realised, his actions are guided by emotions but he uses clear logic when voicing his reasons on his own dissent and causing Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. He is a flawed character that is guided by what are ultimately what I recognize is a very human mindset.*

- Riya

Here, Riya clearly described feeling drawn and impressed towards Satan in *Paradise Lost* and referenced popular culture influencing her sympathy towards him. However, later, during the in-person interview, Riya insisted that she found the character of Satan “simple” and “self-explanatory” and said that she would not particularly want to focus on him had she conducted her own seminar on the poem. Moreover, despite previously stating in her questionnaire that she thought *Paradise Lost* was one of the greatest pieces of English literature, in the interview, she expressed that she would not read it again. What Riya's case study shows is how different various mediums of collecting data can potentially affect, change, or influence a subject's response, which is something that must be considered with caution. We understand, then, that all Muslimah participants aside from Riya made direct comparisons and references to their religious and/or cultural formations when reading Milton's Satan.

All in all, this sample group of Muslim women revealed the distinct differences of opinion amongst them. For the Muslimahs in this chapter, there were typically three stands of thinking. In the first, we found readers such as Sannah, Alya, and Preethi, who were all somewhat troubled by Milton's depiction of Satan and felt a level of discomfort during their reading experiences. In the second, readers Manal, Ansar and Hana were all impressed by Milton's portrayal of the fallen figure, but stated that they were not fooled. Manal went further, making a valuable distinction between sympathising and appreciating Satan. This sentiment was shared in Nusaybah's response who belongs in the final category of readers who remained unimpressed by Satan. For Nusaybah, Satan was deemed an illogical creature, whereas in Riya's case, he was dismissed during her interview on the basis that she deemed him "self-explanatory". For a number of these women, having an Islamic framework provided a useful lens by which they could understand the character better and affirmed their spirituality. Whilst for others, it gave rise to feelings of discomfort and a crisis of faith, even momentarily. This sample group of Muslim women reveals the distinct differences of opinion amongst them, yet highlights the fundamental fact that for the majority, their unique readerprints were most certainly coloured by their religious formations.

To conclude, while the conversational chatter and interest on the fury-filled angel may have increased in recent years as Leonard predicted, there is no doubt an influx of differing viewpoints on how Satan is interpreted in modern minds today. These opinions will, of course, have always existed. However, license for them to roam freely in creative and Miltonic circles has not. It is by analysing the reading experiences of more minority groups such as those of British South-Asian Muslimahs, that we realise how unhelpful and a disservice it is to the poem to assume a general reader, especially when looking at a character such as this, whose name and legacy has undoubtedly left a different imprint on us all. What was clear across all sample groups however, was the tendency for participants to approach



the figure of Satan in a dualistic way, reflecting on him both as a figure who represents something bad and evil, but at the same time, as someone that they could identify with and relate to. With Satan's novelistic qualities awakening a deeper complexity in numerous readers, the notion of relatability was a driving force and united many. When considering the unique readerprints of participants, it was clear that interpretations of Milton's Satan were heavily influenced by unique social, cultural, psychological, and religious formations. To summarise, with Christian readers, the impression was that they often felt moved and sympathetic towards Satan, but were reluctant to view him in a positive light when reminded of his sinful state. This was not shared amongst all of them however, as the spiritual sensitivities of respondents was apparent as some issued warnings that the text should only be read by those who had a sound knowledge of Christian theology, which would assure that they will not fall prey to Satan's deceit. With regard to the lapsed Christians, what seemed to be a commonality between most of them was their ability to see the good in Satan and sympathise, yet still scrutinise his behaviour. When it came to the Jewish responses, though there was an acknowledgement that the character had made them question their faith, there was a surprising lack of scrutiny for Satan. The Jewish respondents reported feeling moved by Satan's representation and perceived him to be more of a tragic hero. This had similarities with the atheist respondents in the study who typically looked favourably upon Satan. The group of atheist readers often rationalised their thoughts by either aligning themselves with the Romantic tradition or viewing the narrative through a lens of overcoming tyranny and political power. In the absence of this, Satan was viewed sympathetically through feelings of emotional relatability which was something they shared with their peers who identified with a religion. It is important to note however, that this was not an agreed consensus for all, as clearly, some of the atheist participants remained unsure, unmoved, or not fooled by the fallen figure at all. Lastly, there was undoubtedly a reluctance to look too kindly upon Satan

by the Muslim women, as they were careful to reserve compliments for Milton's craft instead. The Muslimahs were also clearly influenced by their religious formations, but also other factors including their personality types. What was perhaps most interesting was to see how readers navigated through narratives of difference and feelings of discomfort. Though all were confronted by the same demon on the pages of *Paradise Lost*, the diverse opinions and interpretations reflects how intersectional identities, or our readerprints, are useful tools to help us understand not only the fury-filled fallen angel, but ourselves and each other too.

## Adam

Perceptions and understandings of the figure of ‘Adam’ are undeniably fuelled by the lasting legacy of the Abrahamic traditions. Those belonging to Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faith groups uphold these traditions and perceive origin stories of Adam and Eve as the ultimate truth. As a result, the first human’s significance holds much symbolic weight and is still of paramount importance to many today. However, as Aaminah Patel notes, the concept of Adam also ‘transcends the boundaries of religious discussion’ through art, music, and popular culture in everyday life.<sup>1</sup> With Milton basing his poetic adaptation on the Christian paradigm, his own depiction of Adam in *Paradise Lost* has also caused quite a stir over hundreds of years. For instance, within critical discourse during different moments in history, unlike the Romantics, Samuel Johnson recognises Adam as the true hero of *Paradise Lost*;<sup>2</sup> while Walter Landor states ‘it is Adam who acts and suffers most, and on whom the consequences have most influence. This constitutes him the main character’.<sup>3</sup> Going further, Arthur Waldock argues that the presentation of the first man awakens a ‘conflict’ in readers, who are ‘pulled in two ways’ as Milton’s poetic power makes it impossible to condemn him.<sup>4</sup>

Despite this, more recent critics complicate this picture of Adam with discourse typically revolving around issues including knowledge, marriage, sexual politics, misogyny, and patriarchy. Whilst some have positioned themselves as sympathetic defenders of the first man, feminist readings have not looked kindly upon Adam’s characterisation (and Milton

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<sup>1</sup> Aaminah Kulsum Patel, ‘The Ascent of Adam: Re-Evaluating the First Prophet in Quranic Exegesis’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Kings College London, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Johnson stated that if success was a necessary requirement for gaining heroic status, Adam would qualify: “Adam’s deceiver was at last crushed; Adam was restored to his Maker’s favour, and therefore may securely resume his human rank”. Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets: Waller, Milton, Cowley* (London: Cassell and Co., 2014), in Project Gutenberg, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5098/5098-h/5098-h.htm> [accessed 1 July 2022].

<sup>3</sup> John Leonard, *Faithful Labourers: A Reception History of ‘Paradise Lost’, 1667-1970: Volume II: Interpretive Issues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 421.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur J. A. Waldock, *Paradise Lost and its Critics*, 4th edn (London: Cambridge University Press, 1964), p. 55.

himself) in respect to the poem's treatment of Eve.<sup>5</sup> David Urban, for instance, characterises Adam's behaviour as 'insincere' and 'narcissistic' as he blames Eve for his Fall despite a 'romantic pretence of sacrifice'.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, in Leonard's tracing of the poem's reception history, reactions towards Adam's 'misogynistic outbursts' range from approval to outrage and disgust.<sup>7</sup> The issue of equality between the sexes is another point of contention with critics including Mary Wollstonecraft seeing the difficulty and inconsistencies in the poem,<sup>8</sup> and Dianne McColley arguing that Adam and Eve operate on a basis of mutuality rather than equality.<sup>9</sup>

But what of modern-day readers born of this particular moment? Where do their thoughts on the famous first man leave them? Analysing Adam in *this* reception study was always going to be an interesting experience. The character was, after all, subject to examination by mostly women readers. By factoring in the unique intersectional identities of readers, this chapter demonstrates how faith is a force that often shapes how readers interpret Adam's character. It explores how the Muslimah respondents tended to look at the character of Adam in a softer and compassionate light which is reflective of prophet Adam's characterisation in the Islamic tradition. Where Muslimahs were dissatisfied with Milton's portrayal, it explains how this was because readers felt Milton's adaptation fell short to their religious understandings of the first man. Contrastingly, this chapter also presents the reader responses of their non-Muslim counterparts who had a stronger tendency to dislike Adam and were disturbed by the portrayal. Moreover, it uncovers varying degrees of contextual and

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<sup>5</sup> Milton is considered an antifeminist and misogynistic writer through his depiction of the first couple in *Paradise Lost*, see Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination*, 2nd edn. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> David V. Urban, 'The Falls of Satan, Eve, and Adam in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*: A Study in Insincerity', *Christianity & Literature*, 67.1, (2017), 89-112.

<sup>7</sup> In *Faithful Laborers*, James Paterson is named as a figure who "applauds Adam's misogynistic outbursts" (p. 664), while Mary Wray (p. 656) and the Richardsons (p. 662) are among those who remain unimpressed.

<sup>8</sup> Leonard, p. 668.

<sup>9</sup> Diane K. McColley, 'Milton and the Sexes', in *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*, ed. by Dennis Danielson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 175-192.

self-awareness in respondents as it investigates how empathy operates in the instances that readers do connect with him; and examines how fury and frustration cause his dismissal for others.

Though some level of resistance towards Milton's Adam was expected, it was surprising to observe that non-Muslim respondents were far angrier and dissatisfied when discussing his character. Receiving largely negative responses, Adam was often heavily critiqued and viewed as morally and behaviourally flawed by the non-Muslim participants:

*I am not attracted to the character of Adam because of the way he responds to Eve and to the situation after eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge. Although I appreciate that they are both as bad as each other when they do not accept responsibility for their own actions, his response to Eve's outrage seems to be fuelled by misogyny. Telling Eve that women exploit male temptations and weaknesses and blame the faults of mankind upon them seems to just reiterate and reinforce Milton's contemporary perceptions about a woman's position.*

- Stacey

Echoing the views of critics who also interpret Adam's behaviour as misogynistic, for Christian reader Stacey, though both parties were blamed for their acts against God, Adam's later act against Eve was inexcusable and therefore deemed unforgiveable. Due to what she regarded as the "misogynistic nature of Adam and Eve's relationship", Stacey admitted to finding the poem problematic. The undergraduate student explained that she took issue with the poem's gender dynamics, particularly with how Eve was presented more negatively than Adam:

*[...] punishment for Eve is far more severe than what Adam receives, she is condemned to pain and suffering while he just has to struggle to find food etc. Ultimately, the balance of responsibility doesn't rest easy with me in their characters.*

- Stacey

Unlike Landor who maintains that Adam is the chief recipient of suffering in the poem, for Stacey, there is a clear disparity.<sup>10</sup> This differs from how British-Indian Muslimah Manal interpreted Adam and his relationship:

*I found Adam a fascinating character in Paradise Lost, mostly because he is depicted very similarly to how he is portrayed in the Islamic Tradition. He is a man of intellect, honoured by God and is in essence, the symbol of the perfect human being. I enjoyed the aspect of the poem which emphasized his love for Eve, as this is often muted in commentaries on Adam in Islam.*

- Manal

As is made clear here, the traces of misogyny that Stacey refers to were not commented on by this Muslimah participant. Instead, for Manal, an admiration of Adam in the Qur'an was carried through to her reading of him in the poem. Commenting on the attitudes of Muslims towards the figure of Adam in Islamic tradition, Islam Issa explains that 'Muslims perceive Adam as a perfect deliverer of his message. His transgression can be understood as an integral part of his message of humility and repentance'.<sup>11</sup> Adam's 'failings' are therefore not measured in the same manner or regarded as such. This is certainly the case with 'cultural

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<sup>10</sup> Leonard, p. 421.

<sup>11</sup> Islam Issa, *Milton in the Arab Muslim World* (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 192.

accommodator' Manal's readerprint, as she merges her Islamic knowledge with the narrative's lessons of love and redemption, leading her to optimistically describe the poem as "the story of Adam", a story which everyone can "relate to". For Manal, finding the story relatable meant making empathetic connections that bridge her Islamic spiritual understanding with her lived experiences. This was also resonant in British-Pakistani reader Mariyah's take of Adam in the poem:

*Adam perfectly describes an everyday human in today's life and is a character you can relate to. He goes from being a perfect human being to falling into sin after realising Eve is doomed after eating the apple. However, that should be a reflection on all of us in today's age, to not follow someone else into sin and to realise that God comes first and foremost.*

- Mariyah

Though Mariyah states that her Muslim background had not coloured her interpretation of the poem, the lessons she takes from Adam seem to correspond closely with other Muslimah readers in the study. The discrepancy between what this reader says and what she thinks about her background's influence reveals a lack of critical self-awareness on her part. This reflects the often-unconscious effect of a person's intersectional identity which may colour their world view in a way unknown to them.

Unlike Mariyah, Christian reader Judy was conscious of her religious understanding of Adam and used it to compare the Biblical and Miltonic traditions:

*I was unmoved by the character of Adam, even in the Bible he is difficult to sympathise with as he neglects all personal responsibility. His interaction with Eve in*

*Paradise Lost does give another insight into his character but ultimately his rejection of God is what stands out to me the most.*

- Judy

Despite Judy's judgement in describing Adam as negating all responsibility and rejecting God, later in the questionnaire, it was fascinating to observe that she still solely chose to identify Eve as responsible for the fall. The Christian reader stated:

*I'll confess that it comes partly down to my grounding in the Biblical Genesis but actually no matter how the circumstance unfolded - Eve neglected her personal responsibility and disobeyed God. That's not to say that Adam didn't either, but that doesn't make it less true.*

- Judy

This contrasts to another Christian reader, this time, Rachel who found fault in Adam and viewed Eve as a victim of his actions:

*I disliked Adam. He was lacking in scope and I found no surprises in him. He uses Eve as a scapegoat for the Fall despite the fact he is weak minded, objectifying and lustful even before the eating of the fruit.*

- Rachel

From this it is apparent that it is often Adam's behaviour and treatment of Eve that triggers disapproval for many female non-Muslim respondents. By contrast, for Muslimah reader



Zainab, “a mixture of all” of the characters are blamed for their part in the Fall as everyone had a “role to play”. Analysing Milton’s Adam, Zainab wrote:

*His weakness - and by extension, men's weakness - is supposedly their love for women and knowledge. This propels Adam's downfall. Prior to it, he is enamoured with Eve, yet after it he is momentarily hateful and angry. His fall brings out his vices.*

- Zainab

While this British-Pakistani respondent did not seem to critique Adam as strongly as others, Zainab did attest that *Paradise Lost* was “derogatory towards women”:

*Women are treated as the 'lesser' sex, inferior, ignorant, blamed for the fall of man. There are numerous instances in which women (Eve) is left out... such as when the angels explain creation to Adam and Eve is somewhere in the background or told later by Adam.*

- Zainab

The poem sparked further discomfort in Christian reader April who stressed the difference in representation between Biblical Adam and Adam in the poem:

*Adam was entitled and grasping for the moral high ground whereas in Genesis there is a higher emphasis on the equality between man and women before [the] fall. Adam didn't fit the version that I had before the book, rather a misogynistic man of the time it was written.*

- April

Attending Bible classes and studying Genesis in Ancient Hebrew meant that April was extra attentive during her reading experience to how Milton's adaptation differed to what she understood as the truth. The Christian reader's dissatisfaction was further apparent as she pointed out that "Milton's blatant misogyny and misreading" of Genesis in presenting a "weak and feeble Eve" and a "righteous, misguided Adam who nobly sacrifices himself for Eve" was problematic.

The negative aspect of Adam's dominance was also noticed by lapsed Christian respondent Alex, who unlike Rachel and April, did somewhat sympathise with the character as the poem progressed:

*I was mostly unmoved by Adam. Particularly in view of the relationship between him and Eve at the beginning of the poem, I found him quite controlling which led to me being less sympathetic towards him. I became a little more sympathetic towards him by the end of the poem, as he has some quite evocative speeches after the fall, but I still viewed him as a figure who sought dominance over Eve which made it difficult to fully sympathise with him.*

- Alex

British-Pakistani Muslimah Riya also spoke of Milton's Adam's dominance, but held the opinion that despite all his wrongdoing, he was still a good character:

*My first impression of Adam is that he is quite curious as a character. He strives for the attention of God the Father and isn't afraid to ask the angels for both guidance and answers to his questions. He seems almost unafraid at times, for example, when he*

*asks God the father to provide him with a companion, but at times [sic. times] he seems almost irrational, as evidenced when Adam and Eve fall to Earth, blaming Eve for their punishment despite eating the fruit as well. I feel that Adam represents both dominance that comes from being the first male but also encompasses the masculinity that is expected of him as well. However, he does develop to be a better man, especially in Book 12. His admittance of his own actions in the downfall of man and his own promise to stand by Eve as equals makes him, in my eyes – a good character.*

- Riya

Whilst interviewing 26-year-old Riya who I deem a ‘contrarian’, she shared her belief that her presence as a mature student in the classroom gave her a different insight to her peers, because “when you’re older, you just see different points of view a lot more than the black and white version”. Though this statement is impossible to verify, unlike previous respondents who usually focussed their attention on Eve, Riya was unique in viewing Adam as a product, and victim, of masculinity.

Interestingly, Christian reader Joseph also understood Milton’s Adam’s differently and sympathised with his arc:

*Adam is quite a dull character to me up until his fall. Unfallen, he seems 'nice' in the vaguest way possible and doesn't have much of a personality. His love for Eve is sincere but somewhat paternalistic and is expressed in very overblown language. It is only when Eve has eaten of the fruit when Adam becomes interesting. His debate with himself whether to eat the fruit or not moves me deeply. His love and faith, his two central attributes, are put against each other. And while he's wrong to eat of the fruit,*

*goodness know I sympathise. And then after the Fall, his monologues in Book 10 are also heart-breaking.*

- Joseph

Sharing similarities with the female Muslim respondents, the empathetic feelings towards Adam are what draw Joseph to appreciate Adam's depiction. For Joseph, beauty is found in the struggle of having to make choices regarding faith, thus increasing his interest as a result. Joseph's response bears resemblance with Alya's who also views the character in a sympathetic light:

*Adam is a character that seems to value reason and logic and, therefore, is attractive to me as a reader. The fact that he is also victim to The Fall when he eats from the forbidden tree as Eve does appears to be solely for the fact that he understands he cannot be with her unless he also commits himself to her fate. Although it is disappointing to see a character that I am attracted to disobey God and succumb to temptation, I still sympathise with him because he seems to do so out of the compassion he has for Eve.*

- Alya

Unlike Urban who perceived Adam's act as a selfish one,<sup>12</sup> there are no indications in Alya's questionnaire response or interview that she found Adam's behaviour towards Eve cruel or misogynistic. Rather, the impression that is left with the Muslimah respondent is that Adam acted out of love. Where criticism does exist in Alya's response, it is found in her belief that Eve is intellectually inferior in the poem and an "object of male desire". However, the

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<sup>12</sup> Urban, pp. 89-112.

British-Biracial reader does take note of the fact that Milton's representation is not so typical in the sense that Eve is disobedient, and Adam is not authoritative in attempting to stop her. Adam's passiveness is also commented on by Arab Canadian-Muslimah Maysa who found the character annoying:

*Adam was annoying and I didn't like how he was kind of just chilling in Eden. When I say annoying, I think it's because my interpretation of him was that he was leisurely spending his time. And I think this reaction comes from not having a critical understanding of Adam from the Islamic perspective. For example, to my knowledge, Adam was created and he was granted the knowledge to name things and animals, but after this point, I don't know any other information about him. And so, I think that seeing Milton represent Adam in a leisurely manner annoyed me because I thought - is this the representation of Adam that I want? What do I want to see? Maybe this representation speaks to an overall suggestion about humans?*

- Maysa

Maysa's claim that Adam was acting in a leisurely way can of course be dismissed if we recall his shared workload with Eve and the educational conversations he has with Raphael. Nonetheless, what the Canadian-Muslimah's claim does highlight is her discomfort in not knowing what to believe due to her perceived gap in Islamic knowledge. This illustrates the power that religion can have over an individual as it is often used as a framework to help navigate life and inform understanding – even when encountering literature. After stating that she blamed the first couple for the Fall due to their inability to “think critically about their situation”, Maysa reflected on her own life:

*[...] maybe this is me recognizing that I need to be more critically aware of the situations that I am put in or that I put myself in, so my reasoning is not logical in the sense that I base it on personal awareness rather than an interpretation of the text.*

- Maysa

Maysa's reading demonstrates that she recognises how her reading of the text reveals something about her. This level of self-awareness when considering the first man's portrayal was not so common in the study as few participants perceived it this way. While Maysa thought that Adam acted too leisurely, British-Bengali Muslimah Hana states that the character was "too curious":

*I think Adam is too curious in Paradise Lost, enquiring about all the aspects of the earth and the universe. In Islamic teaching, God had given the ability to Adam to know the names of all the things on earth before the angels. Therefore, giving importance and value to humankind.*

- Hana

The (reluctant) 'cultural accommodator'<sup>13</sup> juxtaposes the portrayals of Adam in *Paradise Lost* and the Qur'an which give her mixed feelings towards the character. Salma, who is a British-Pakistani Muslimah, also reacts with less enthusiasm and states that she was "bemused" by Milton's work:

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<sup>13</sup> See mention of Hana in chapters on Satan and Eve which explain why she is considered reluctant in her personality characterisation.

*My teacher made me feel like I was meant to feel a certain way about Adam. But Adam to me, is not someone that made me move or feel sympathy for in PL, as he lacks the innocence and devotion to God that Adam in the Qur'an, Bible etc showed.*

- Salma

It seems, then, that in the rare cases that Muslimah respondents are dissatisfied with Milton's Adam, it is when the figure falls short, and differs from their understandings of him in the Islamic tradition.

Sharing similarities with Salma, Christian participant Natasha also reports feeling unmoved by Adam's portrayal, but later showed an interest in his character:

*Upon first encountering Adam in Paradise Lost, I would say I was unmoved by his character. I was interested in his engagements with Raphael and later on Michael and I would say Adam's character develops in Paradise Lost. However, I don't know whether what interested me was the probing, philosophical, theological ideas with which he engages was what interested me more than Adam himself. It almost felt as if he was handed this intellect on a plate which was frustrating. I think what felt most frustrating about this was that I wasn't surprised by it. I think this handing of a deep and growing intellect to Adam is not just reflective of Milton's own gender views. The more positive elaboration of Adam (as none of this takes place in the Bible) goes in line with the presentations of Adam and Eve as told in Genesis, where Adam is viewed as more redeemable because he 'falls' second.*

- Natasha

Natasha was very conscious of how gender and sexuality in *Paradise Lost* were “reflective of a misogynistic stance” of an author who was a product of his time. The Christian reader states that when she remembers that these stances reflect that of seventeenth century thinking, some of the frustration she feels and difficulties she experiences are taken away. Though the poem ignites these (albeit momentary) flushes of discomfort within Natasha, it is with fondness that she looks back at the poem. As a practicing Christian, she states that she has never encountered a text that has challenged and made her reflect as much as *Paradise Lost* has – and insists that faith and belief mean nothing if they are not challenged.

As explored thus far, while Adam has often been praised for his rationality, logical mind, and intellect, for Christian reader Grace, an entirely different impression was made:

*To be blunt and perhaps unscholarly, I find Adam a little... slow-witted? In comparison to Eve, who often more poetically sums things up, Adam really spells things out slowly especially in his conversations with the angels. Perhaps it is his function to be a student and so we see the cogs of his understanding clinking into place and this helps the reader to understand at the same pace. On the whole, I am not particularly attracted or sympathetic to the character, but the way the narrator describes his responses to Michael's relation of future-history in Book 12 is moving for me as is his part in his companionship with Eve - there are moments of surrender and vulnerability. His least attractive moment in the poem is the 'She gave me of the Tree, and I did eat' line in Book 10 which feels, to me, like he's trying to mitigate his own sin by presenting it via Eve's influence, rather than just owning it. And for that I think we all lose a bit of respect for him. This is good, though, as we are not presented with a perfect vision of him and an imperfect one of Eve -- Adam is foolish and flawed.*



- Grace

For Grace, while none of the characters can be cleared of personal responsibility, she finds Adam guilty of “the most stupid”, “maybe the most loving”, or “possessive” Fall. Unlike many respondents who find an appeal towards Adam through his discourse with the angels, for Grace, they signal his unintelligence. An imperfect view of Adam, however, is one that this Christian reader appreciates. Comparably, lapsed Christian reader Stuart also acknowledges the view that Adam can be regarded as boring. However, the male participant reflects on the character’s strength in being able to show emotion:

*Adam himself was meant to be created as a copy of God. But Adam himself had no drive. Just as a task is repeated forever, eventually people would grow bored. Adam can be said to be bland and weak, but Adam himself was the first human. He had no others to socialise with for a time and as such did not know how humans acted. And as shown in Paradise Lost, Adam's weakness was that he trusted Eve and went along with what she said. But I believe that Adam's trusting nature was one of his strengths. He was someone who was not afraid of his emotions, something that modern day men are still trying to get in touch with, and loved with all his heart. [...] he definitely showed more love than others.*

- Stuart

Elaborating further, Stuart points out that seeing a male character such as Adam be visibly vulnerable with his emotions felt pleasing to see as “it has been shamed for generations for men to be emotional”. Stuart’s readerprint is unique as no other participants in the study

empathised with Adam in this manner. For instance, Skyla, who is another lapsed Christian respondent, met Milton's Adam with indifference:

*I found Adam to be a fairly passive character and so my feelings towards him were largely indifferent. From a feminist perspective it is easy to read Adam's character as an unconscious persecutor of Eve as well, hence my indifference, but I believe that my reaction did waver at times to both a more positive and more negative reaction. An example of this is when Adam eats the forbidden fruit, so that he won't be without Eve but then blames her for later destroying their paradise - the former conjures more positive feelings the latter breaks them back down.*

- Skyla

For Skyla, Adam's act of blaming his partner tarnishes his previous shows of affection. Though he is technically forgiven by God the Father in the poem (and in Christian theology), the feeling of lasting disappointment towards Adam's character is a common feeling for many of the female non-Muslim participants, including Claire:

*Adam was a character that slightly irritated me at times. The way that he treats Eve and explains his fears for her separating from him only makes me view him as patriarchal and untrusting of Eve. Though he somewhat redeems himself in the eyes of love by eating the forbidden fruit so as not to live without her, he soon turns to resenting her for his decision.*

- Claire

As an individual who identifies as being an atheist, Claire clarifies that religious frameworks had not influenced her experience of reading the poem. Rather, she points to her 21<sup>st</sup> century mindset which made her view women with more “rights and equality” – thus leading her to read Adam and Eve in a “different way”. It is important to note here that like Claire, all participants would have been reflecting on the poem during the “Me Too” movement.<sup>14</sup>

Though it cannot be determined how much this has affected each participant, it can perhaps explain why some readers are hyperaware and critical of gender dynamics in the poem.

Frustration was also an impulse shared by Jane who was aware of how her personal views on society had affected her readerprint:

*[...] I think Adam's characterisation was less interesting; he seems the much weaker of the two after the fall, requiring Eve's strength to bouy him up when he falls into despair. His cruelty to her moves me to tears ('nothing but a rib' 'crooked my nature'), as does the moment when he drops her flower crown. These are the strongest memories I have of Adam's character which reveals to me that I see him only in relation to the radiance of Eve's character. Eve is intrepid, Adam cautious, Eve fell through ambition, Adam stumbled after her through love which is a far less complicated, interesting motive to read. If we view Eve's fall sympathetically - she fell through the cunning manipulation of the embodiment of evil, resistance was an impossibility as she was created by a God who knew she would fall from before she was created in a cosmic set up that has been used to justify the subjugation of women ever since - then surely our ire must fall even heavier on Adam who only needed Eve to bat her eyelashes for him to tumble after her. Adam just seems a far less*

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<sup>14</sup> Initially founded in 2006, “Me Too” is a social movement against sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and rape culture, in which people publicise their experiences of sexual abuse or sexual harassment. It went viral across the globe in October 2017 and remains a topic of conversation today.

*remarkable, far crueller character than Eve. Perhaps I also read this character with a lot of pent-up aggression as this story (the creation story not Paradise Lost) propped up the patriarchal Christian Church since its inception. To view Adam with some disgust is perhaps my protest against the way he has been viewed in contrast to his wife ever since.*

- Jane

Similarly, for another identifying feminist and atheist reader, Bella's frustration also reached resounding new heights:

*Oh, Adam. I was not a fan at all. I honestly think this poem really brought out the feminist in me to whole new levels. I wrote my essay on Eve and her relationship to him and the more I researched and read I just found myself getting more and more frustrated and exasperated by him. At the beginning I found him quite harmless, he had only just got to Eden and he was doing as he was told and then I started to respect him a bit more in Book 8. The beginning of Book 9 I hate to admit I saw where he was coming from but I sided with Eve and felt indignant on her behalf - why can't she be trusted? I do wish maybe he had had a bit more exploration because I would have liked to get to know him a bit better. The end of Book 9 and the rest of the poem he was so unlikeable to me - nobody told you to eat the fruit!*

- Bella

Viewing Adam as an aggressor, Bella and Jane's irritation can be felt through the page. Alongside their feminist ideals, their shared connection with Eve as women has certainly

propelled them to revolt against the figure of the first man. For Jane, however, reprimanding Adam is a literary act of protest against the institution of Christianity as a whole.

It can be said, then, that amongst the sample of atheist participants, an overwhelming sense of negativity and heavy critique towards Milton's Adam is present. The character is deemed "uninspiring", "self-righteous", "weak", "uncharismatic", and "a pious bore" by a number of these readers. Simone finds Milton's Adam to be one of the least interesting characters in the poem:

*[...] He seems to be more of a tool, a way of explaining humankind's first experiences, rather than a dynamic and compelling character in himself. He's the only character in the poem whose speech frustrates me. The whole reason that Eve left him and subsequently fell is because he implied that she could not be trusted on her own - he doubts her. And she is hurt. They argue after the Fall, but I'm not sure what Adam's redeeming feature is, other than loving Eve and reconciling to face the future with her. She is the one who proposes to take the entire blame upon herself in order to save him. He has no such profound act of selflessness.*

- Simone

For Jack, however, a level of sympathy for Milton's Adam is exhibited:

*I was sympathetic towards Adam, purely down to his rather exploited position. He is someone who tries to stand up as the dominant figure but is entirely undermined by Eve's transgression. His sympathy is reduced though by his brutally misogynistic rant to Eve after she transgresses but he does overcome this and does unify with Eve by the end. To me he is very much a figure of failed male authority.*

- Jack

Like many of the previously mentioned participants, Jack does take issue with Adam's "misogynistic rant", however, for this atheist male reader, it is forgiven. Nevertheless, the fact that Adam remains a figure that signifies "failed male authority" makes one wonder what successful male authority means to this reader. I wish I had asked.

Monica, another atheist, also reflects upon the authority of men:

*I'm not a fan of Adam at all. He comes across as a misogynistic, naive, stupid man-child. He does not make any real contributions to the argument of the poem, he serves simply to bash Eve down and not allow her any freedom. My feelings are that he ultimately is to blame for the fall as if he had allowed Eve more autonomy she would not have been seduced by Satan. I think this in part comes from growing up in a household with a relatively controlling father figure who I definitely see reflected in Adam.*

- Monica

Understandably, Adam's portrayal in *Paradise Lost* sadly triggered unfortunate childhood memories for Monica, which seem to have projected onto her reading of the first man and coloured her readerprint. Unlike Jack's instance where no sympathy is felt for Milton's Adam, Monica designates direct blame on his character. Her referral to Adam as a "stupid man-child" is rather interesting as it indicates that she perceives him as immature and undeserving of his status and rank as the first human.

Quite remarkably, when asking the participants which words they most commonly associated with the character of Adam in *Paradise Lost*, the descriptor that scored the highest across all sample groups was the word “feeble”:

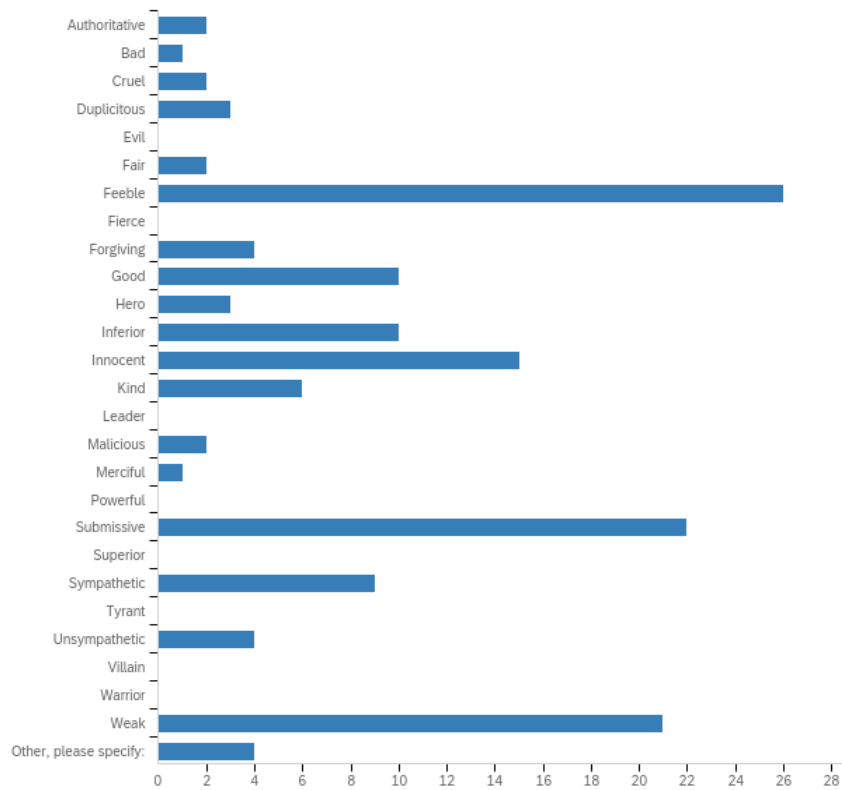


Figure 6 – Non-Muslim respondents associating words with Adam

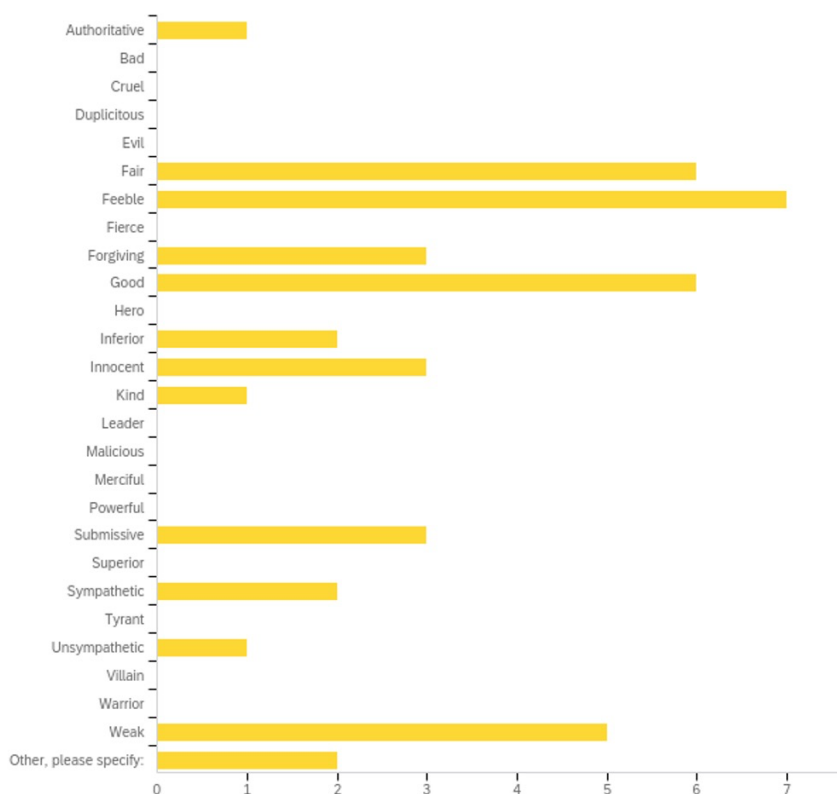


Figure 7 - Muslim respondents associating words with Adam

This choice is striking as “feeble” was selected even amongst those who looked favourably upon his character – including some of the Muslimah respondents. What this indicates is the overall passivity associated with Adam’s character – which, as we have seen, has been interpreted both positively and negatively. Though this is the case, there is still a clear distinction between how the Muslimah participants perceive Adam in contrast to the non-Muslim readers. Following “feeble”, the “submissive” and “weak” descriptors ranked highest for the non-Muslim respondents whilst “fair” and “good” were selected by the Muslimahs. This finding suggests a key difference in perception and understanding between them, highlighting the probability that faith may certainly have been a factor that has coloured the readerprints of the Muslimahs, leaving them with more of a promising portrait of the first man.



To demonstrate this further, we finally turn to ‘the conformist’ British Muslimah reader, Nusayba. When asked to reflect on the character of Adam in Milton’s poem, the 26-year-old admitted to feeling “confused” over his portrayal. Despite her initial uncertainty, Nusayba (who aligns herself with orthodox Islamic thought) is unique in the sample as she concluded that that the pair were “very much equal,” and operated on a basis of mutuality.<sup>15</sup> The Muslim reader explained feeling guilty over studying a text in relation to such seminal figures as they were very much intertwined with her own Islamic faith. Like Natasha however, she was of the mindset that faith meant nothing if not challenged.

Nusayba: With my concept of how I’ve read it, and interpreted it and related it back to Islam, my perception of that book is completely different. And I think it could be taught in that way- in relation to Islam to be honest, because Islam and Christianity are so similar.

- Excerpt from interview with Nusayba

Though she shares similarities with most Muslimah participants in viewing Adam in a softer light, Nusayba does indeed have her own unique interpretation. This highlights the various, surprising ways in which religious identities can be used to interpret and enhance understanding of the poem. Nusayba’s enthusiasm spotlights the boundless ways in which *Paradise Lost* has cross-cultural potential, and reflects the difference that each individual reader will undoubtedly bring to the creative table.

In conclusion, non-Muslim readers of *Paradise Lost* in this reception study were on average, far more frustrated and dissatisfied with Milton’s Adam in comparison to the female Muslim readers. Adam was often viewed as flawed, wrongful, and selfish, non-Muslim

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<sup>15</sup> A fuller exploration of Nusayba’s response on the human couple can be seen in the chapter on Eve.

participants were disturbed by his portrayal, particularly in regard to Adam's treatment of Eve. For these readers, instances which were interpreted as patriarchal and misogynistic were directly linked to Adam and were commonly the cause of his dismissal or were the reason for their feelings of fury or indifference. Discomfort was particularly noticeable amongst the Christian and lapsed Christian participants who found fault in how Milton's Adam complicated or opposed the Biblical Adam that they were familiar with. The socio-cultural awareness of the treatment of gender in today's age often heightened these reactions, leading many respondents to feel uneasy with siding or sympathising with Adam. While some of the Muslimah participants also commented on gender issues, they had more of a tendency to attribute these to the time that the poem was written and spoke little more on this topic. It must be said, however, that for the Muslimahs, there was an undeniable trend in viewing the first man in a softer, and more compassionate light which can be attributed to Adam's characterisation in the Islamic tradition. When it came to analysing responses towards Adam, the effect of the Muslimah readers' religious framework coming into effect was abundantly clear. For instance, while some Muslimahs thought Adam embodied the perfect symbol of a human being and manifested kindness; in other cases where the figure was viewed negatively by the Muslimahs, it was often because they felt Milton's adaptation fell short to what Islam had taught them. Collectively, these rich insights further illustrate the poem's capacity to continuously generate new meaning on this complexly famous, and often thought, infamous first man.

## Eve

Through a reimagining of the Book of Genesis, Milton undoubtedly creates a more nuanced, dynamic, and curiously complex Eve in *Paradise Lost*. Scholarly conversations on this rendition of the female character have most certainly been lively as alongside the poet's depiction of Satan, Milton's portrayal of Eve is renowned for sparking perhaps the greatest debates and controversy in Milton studies. For instance, when considering reception in particular, in *Feminist Milton*, Joseph Wittreich collects the responses of Milton's early female readers before 1830, and declares Milton as the first of the feminists, in whom women found 'an ally in their cause, an advocate for the female, who in *Paradise Lost* turned the tables on patriarchal culture and its misogynistic traditions'.<sup>1</sup> Wittreich concluded that women in the period found in Milton's Eve a progressive, liberal Milton who expressed patriarchal attitudes only to expose and defeat them. This, however, is found troublesome by critics including John Leonard who, upon inspection, suggest that Wittreich misrepresents the opinions of these early women readers through an incorrect use of quotations, often applied out of context, thus rendering them unreliable.<sup>2</sup> In *Faithful Labourers* where we see Leonard's survey of Eve analysing themes of innocence, the Fall, sex and the sexes between 1667-1970, the critic states that Milton's views on women have always provoked dissent, and stresses that his early women readers were not united in the belief that Milton was their champion.<sup>3</sup> These polarised opinions are valuable and intriguing insights into how the character of Eve is received amongst Milton's readers, yet are nonetheless limited by being restricted to Anglo-American responses to the poem.

Efforts to understand the reception of Eve's character with more non-traditional

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<sup>1</sup>Joseph Wittreich, *Feminist Milton* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. xix.

<sup>2</sup>John Leonard, *Faithful Labourers: A Reception History of 'Paradise Lost', 1667-1970: Volume II: Interpretive Issues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 651.

<sup>3</sup>Leonard, p. 703.

readers has been seen in more recent years through the rise of translation studies. For example, in *Milton in the Arab Muslim World*, while analysing the reception of Egyptian Sunni Muslim readers of *Paradise Lost* who were mostly male, Islam Issa notes that aspects of Adam and Eve's relationship appears in some ways closer to Islamic belief than to Milton's biblical source, and thus presents moral exemplars for Muslim readers through factors such as their responsibility, fallibility, knowledge, and aspiration.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, this is fascinating and demonstrates how readers from non-traditional backgrounds have much to offer when it comes to understanding how the poem's complex characters are received and understood in different faith and cultural contexts. To this end, this chapter illuminates who the epic's Eve is in the minds of students in *our* contemporary moment and uncovers what their readerprints look like. It reveals how while there are shared trends of topics discussed across all sample groups, there is a striking sense of unity among Muslimahs who heavily criticise Milton's portrayal of Eve as they perceive it to be an inaccurate representation of the first woman presented in the Qur'anic tradition. Comparatively, I show how non-Muslim respondents are often more comfortable and sympathetic with the depiction and demonstrates how intellectual engagement with the poem is profoundly coloured by the social, cultural, and religious formations of Milton's modern-day readers.

Dealing with the responses of the human figures in *Paradise Lost* was something I always anticipated to be far more complex than discussions on the divine. Here, I was asking modern readers, who each had their own unique readerprints, to comment on the known and familiar. Whether or not they regarded the origin story to be accurate or not, reactions to representations of the first man and women were always going to be fused with personal experiences, and comparative social and political understandings of gender in both our, and Milton's time. The goal was never to rid readers of these packages that they came with, but

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<sup>4</sup> Islam Issa, *Milton in the Arab Muslim World* (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 228-229.

rather, to understand how they could have potentially informed and influenced interpretations – which was certainly the case for many when they encountered Milton’s Eve. It has been fruitful to consider the parts played by religion and culture as they revealed that opinions on Eve’s portrayal were distinctly divided for the respondents. Almost instantly, it became clear that the majority of the Muslim readers in the study had an entirely different perception of Eve than their non-Muslim counterparts. There were, however, common topics and themes that dominated conversation across all sample groups such as the subjects of blame, intellect, patriarchy, and control. This is unsurprising given the debates that currently revolve around Eve’s character in recent critical discourse,<sup>5</sup> but perhaps more so due to the study having a higher intake of female respondents, thus reflecting the issues and themes that resonate most with them. However, despite these common threads of engagement, the imprints that lingered with the readers could not have been more different.

Unimpressed and unmoved, the British South-Asian Muslimahs met Milton’s depiction of the first woman with hostility and resistance as they deemed her to be “disappointing”, “frustrating”, and “narcissistic”. While some offered little elaboration on their critique, others including 25-year-old reader Zainab, were more expressive:

*She embodies narcissism and I disliked Milton's portrayal of her, there is something misogynistic in its roots... she is fixated with her own appearance and is beguiled by Satan's charming words. It adds to the biblical perception of women facilitating the*

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<sup>5</sup> Em Friedman, 'Unsexed Eden', *Milton Studies*, 64.2, (2022), 283-315; Shannon Miller, 'Serpentine Eve: Milton and the Seventeenth-Century Debate Over Women', *Milton quarterly*, 42.1, (2008), 44-68; David V. Urban, 'The Falls of Satan, Eve, and Adam in John Milton's Paradise Lost: A Study in Insincerity', *Christianity & Literature*, 67.1, (2017), 89-112; Sandra M. Gilbert, *Eve in Milton's Paradise Lost: Poignancy and paradox* (2018) <<https://www.bl.uk/restoration-18th-century-literature/articles/eve-in-miltons-paradise-lost-poignancy-and-paradox>> [accessed 1 February 2022].

*fall, (not my own belief, thus not something I particularly hold to high regard). Yet makes for an interesting story.*

- Zainab

While envisioning Eve as a blameworthy and selfish figure in *Paradise Lost*, Zainab subtly noted her own personal and differing religious viewpoint. Interestingly, the British-Pakistani reader's mention of belonging to the Islamic faith was a common occurrence for other Muslimah participants when they too speculated on Eve. Often, an emphasis on the difference between the narratives was cited, which is worth mentioning as in the Islamic tradition, the Qur'an states that both Adam and his spouse (*Hawa*), were both equally responsible and repentant for disobeying God's command:

'[...] But you and your wife, Adam, live in the Garden. Both of you eat whatever you like, but do not go near this tree or you will become wrongdoers.' Satan whispered to them so as to expose their nakedness, which had been hidden from them: he said, 'Your Lord only forbade you this tree to prevent you becoming angels or immortals,' he lured them with lies. Their nakedness became exposed to them when they had eaten from the tree: they began to put together leaves from the Garden to cover themselves. Their Lord called to them, 'Did I not forbid you to approach that tree? Did I not warn you that Satan was your sworn enemy?' They replied, 'Our Lord we have wronged our souls: if You do not forgive us and have mercy, we shall be lost.

(Qur'an 7: 19-23)

The significance of this narratological difference is of great importance as it heavily influenced the readerprints of the majority of Muslimah readers in this study. As Muslimahs were accustomed to hearing a different version of events in the Qur'an where Eve had more autonomy and did not carry the weight of original sin, their frustrations towards Milton's alternate depiction were understandable. British-Indian participant Manal wrote:

*I was not particularly moved by Eve in Paradise Lost. I found a similarity between her and the way early classical writers in Islam depict Eve as blameworthy, even though this is not aligned with the Islam belief about Eve. I found her submissive and lacking in depth.*

- Manal

Here, Manal makes an important distinction between religious scripture and Islamic cultural tradition. Describing Eve as “feeble”, “inferior”, “submissive”, and “weak”, Manal, who I categorise as a ‘cultural accommodator’, initially believed that she approached *Paradise Lost* which an “objective perspective”. However, she later corrects this, admitting that constantly seeing Eve misrepresented in classical Islamic commentaries where she is blamed for Adam's mistake affected the way she approached the poem.

*Perhaps I felt fed up that yet another text portrays her as lacking intellect? Even though Paradise Lost is a poetic depiction and not a theological work, I still think it irritated me!*

- Manal

When asked to elaborate on her irritation further during the interview, Manal shared:

Manal: Ok, so, in the Qur'an, Eve isn't really characterised much, and any characterisation that we see of her in Qur'an commentaries, is influenced by the biblical narrative of Eve, in which Eve is seen as like the first tempter of Adam, so Satan tempted her and she tempted Adam, apparently. Right? So that's not the same in the Qur'an, but commentators have taken that from biblical works etc. So I think just to see that in *Paradise Lost* was just like oh my gosh, here we go again. But then I also understand that *Paradise Lost* is based on the Bible.

-Excerpt from interview with Manal (1)

Manal was aware that she had read *Paradise Lost* with a comparative approach and stated that her understanding of the creation story in the Qur'an made her continuously parallel both narratives. Adding to this, a strong awareness of early Islamic commentary tradition was one that coloured her view of Milton's Eve, resulting in an unsympathetic and unmoved reading of the first woman.

The feeling that Eve had been wronged and misunderstood was a sentiment shared by others in the study including Christian respondent Rachel, who wrote:

*I felt sympathy for Eve as I saw Milton's portrayal of her as symptomatic of the Bible's misinterpretation across the centuries. Eve AND Adam eat the fruit, not just Eve, and Milton chooses to separate them in his epic. To me this is an active choice to display her spiritual inferiority.*

- Rachel



Unlike Manal, Rachel sympathised with Eve and directed her disapproval towards Milton himself, stating that though the poet adapted the narrative in an attempt to provide the character with more “scope”, he had failed as the poem still made her out to be a villain. Sharing that she had “a lot of issues with misogyny, racism and exclusivism inherent in the Bible”, Rachel stated that she chose to reinterpret the Bible in a “very liberal and inclusivist sense” in everyday life. Like Manal, Rachel also pointed to her religious and cultural exposure which informed her critique:

*I went to a CofE primary school but grew up with my mother's Serbian Orthodox celebrations at home (although she isn't particularly religious) - I wouldn't be surprised if this has subconsciously caused the confusion of my beliefs. I think this resulted in my heavy criticism of Milton's portrayal of Eve.*

- Rachel

The legacy of the male gaze on the female figure was further noted by Catholic reader Grace, who also experienced frustration when reading Eve, but offered an alternate perspective:

*I am attracted to, sympathetic with and moved by Eve. I find her compelling -- perhaps because, as a woman, you become attentive to the not so obvious ways in which she is able to exercise her power and convey her complexity. I find myself asking questions about how the knowledge given to Adam and distinctly not addressed to her might have altered her path. Are these disadvantages? I don't know. Many women know what it feels like to be excluded from a conversation between men the way she is in Book 5 -- Milton doesn't even give any lines to describe this, but I think we all keenly feel it. Her absence -- her presence. She must be listening in. Do*

*male readers think about this instinctively? Despite all, she faces the consequences of her actions and sincerely owns up. Her relationship with the earth is nourishing and exemplary. Whilst she inhabits quite neatly defined gender roles, in a hierarchy where Adam is superior to her, I find her final verse -- the last speech in the poem -- to so beautifully and dexterously and ingeniously sum up the contract of love Milton is trying to portray throughout the entire poem. Whilst one can view this as her ultimate submission to Adam, when she says 'but now lead on; In mee is no delay; with thee to goe, Is to stay here; without thee here to stay, Is to go hence unwilling; thou to mee Art all things under Heav'n, all places thou, Who for my wilful crime art banisht hence.' Whilst this can be read as her submitting to Adam's dominance, saying he is her entire world etc. for me it is the push-pull give and take of a relationship which is based on a contract not an oath; whilst she asks Adam to 'lead on' she's also ordering him to lead. Adam is 'all places' and yet she, as a human, is a steward over such places. There's lots of contradictions and subclauses to the idea of straightforward hierarchical dominance which are hidden in the form and poetic devices here. There's so much beneath it all and that is why I am so drawn to her. So much more depth than Adam. I feel defensive of her. Yet often hesitant to write about her as I feel she has been shaped so much by other (old... male...) critics definitions of her and I don't want to shape her with my definition because she's been so manhandled and mishandled already. And then I think... that's exactly why I and others who don't fit that stereotype should be writing about her. The idea of Eve sort of comes off the page and supersedes the character; she comes to represent so much more than what she plucks and eats.*

Grace's insightful account reveals a strong emotional reaction to the poem that was coloured by her identity as a British-Irish Catholic woman. In defence of Milton's Eve, the 25-year-old respondent wrote that she found it problematic that "Eve's Fall is a beguiled Fall and yet gets the most historic blame". Recognising that Eve's character was complex, yet refuting the idea that she was weak, Grace argued:

*Eve is portrayed as a complex character, but the portrayal is nevertheless rooted in the notion that women are the weaker sex, childbirth is the consequence of female sin, Sin is represented as female, Eve is made out of Adam and has no direct contact with angels unless it is to serve or to listen. And yet whilst the letter of the law seems to be that Eve and women in general are easily beguiled, weaker, must submit to men, the spirit of it can show moments where Eve is a representation far beyond what other male authors of this century tend to show. I think this partly comes down to Milton's views on marriage as a contract, not a sacrament, affording a representation of partnership which is inherently individual 'hand in hand took their solitary way'. Weakness in the poem is not reserved for women, but for those, like Satan, who cannot submit to God's rule.*

- Grace

Grace appreciated *Paradise Lost*'s ability to "challenge you to think about the way in which you think", and credited her heritage, religious convictions, and political views to form a deeply personal response to Milton's writing.

In a previous chapter on Satan, I categorised British-Bengali reader Hana as a 'cultural accommodator', albeit a reluctant one. The 24-year-old perceived herself as more of an 'objectivist' thinker, firmly stating in her questionnaire response that she did not believe

that her religious nor her cultural beliefs and attitudes had shaped her understanding and reading of the poem. This was despite the fact she had been making continuous comparisons between the Miltonic and Qur'anic traditions:

*Eve in Paradise Lost is at times, equal to Adam, an aspect I quite like, as even in Islam women are not inferior to men. However, I did not enjoy her vanity, falling in love with her own reflection and eating from the Tree of Knowledge. I find it detracts from the essence of even a seventeenth century woman, who we know due to Aphra Behn, Margaret Cavendish, and Lucy Hutchinson were intellectually advanced. The concept of Eve causing the fall of man is also incoherent with Islamic belief as it was both Adam and Eve who ate from the tree.*

- Hana

As I wondered whether Hana was aware of the discrepancy between her answers and affirmation, we had the following exchange during the follow-up interview:

Eva: What I really enjoyed about reading your questionnaire responses was that every time I asked you a question like how did you react to the characterisation of Eve, or Adam, you said how you reacted to them in *Paradise Lost* and then you always mentioned how they are reflected in the Qur'an.

Hana: Yeah

Eva: So I really like how you kept jumping from one to the other in your analysis.

Hana: Yeah

-Excerpt from interview with Hana (1)

The silence lingered there for a second longer than it probably should have, but thankfully did not register with Hana as odd. Instead, her answer opened a doorway into further discussion:

Eva: Do any think of these similarities and differences affect your attitude to reading *Paradise Lost*? So, for example, how Satan is different to how he is portrayed in the Qur'an, or how God is depicted. Does it affect you in any way?

Hana: Sort of. Certain parts I really hated. For instance, how submissive Eve is and that doesn't go with anything the Qur'an says so I think when I first read that I thought... oh you know... it just made me feel a bit off. But I wouldn't say it made me highly uncomfortable or anything. It just made me think oh it's different here. It was a bit of a shock to see.

-Excerpt from interview with Hana (2)

Though Hana's responses proved to be contradictory as her background clearly did inform her impression on Eve, it provided valuable insight into how readers may be unaware, or reluctant to admit the influence of their backgrounds for various reasons. For instance, for Arab Canadian Muslimah Maysa, parallels between the narratives were also made, however a level of suppression was exhibited as she felt that she should only be approaching the poem through "biblical and eurocentric understandings". I was mindful that during our interview, Hana was sat across the table to someone who had many similar markers of identity to her own – we were two British Bengali, hijab wearing women of the same age in doctoral study.

Perhaps this could account for her change in tone and perspective, or possibly the format of a semi-structured interview itself, which gave way for her to be more expressive. Unlike Maysa, in Hana's interview, she shared that she communicated her Islamic insight with her peers during her seminars, which she felt had been appreciated:

Hana: People were respectful, and they sort of understood where I was coming from because at the end of the day, I feel like if I don't speak out, people will have lost out on a different interpretation of the text. I think that's why it's really important because if I don't tell them the narrative, they won't really understand it and they won't know... and I think I remember speaking about Eve and saying how Eve is not submissive and stuff in the Fall. I think a huge thing that the students in my class found interesting was the fact that Eve didn't cause the Fall in Islam.

Eva: Huge plot twist!

Hana: Yeah, yeah! Huge plot twist! And that's something I brought up because I thought that's really important for them to know that, and for them to acknowledge that in the Early Modern period, they clearly thought that she did... and even to this day, people still think that she does and it's all about the original sin. And then I spoke about what original sin was in Islam, about it being about Cain and Abel... and yeah. I think it brings something new.

-Excerpt from interview with Hana (3)

Hana shared that the majority of students in her seminars were White. Her determination to point out the Qur'anic version of events in this context subtly suggests that she was trying to

reclaim the narrative by presenting Eve in an alternate and more favourable light. Given the cultural climate of today where women's positions in Islam are publicly speculated upon, it is easy to understand why she, and a number of other Muslimahs, embraced the opportunity to tell their peers about a figure who is revered and not blamed in Islam. In effect, such insight would have aided in dismantling negative and sexist stereotypes of Muslim women and helped to reshape the socio-cultural norms of the times we live in. My interview exchange with Hana reveals that interfaith and cross-cultural dialogue was one way in which she was able to contribute to the discussion. However, despite Hana's positive recollection, it must be noted that unfortunately, the parameters of a classroom do not always invite students to think about ways in which their unique backgrounds can be used to enhance readings experiences. This is reinforced by Manal's case, where though her rich insight on early Islamic commentary was shared for this study, the British-Indian participant confessed that she never once spoke during her *Paradise Lost* seminars:

Manal: I just didn't feel comfortable, I felt like I wasn't good enough. [...] It wasn't to do with the text. I think it was just to do with... I didn't feel like I was in a place where my opinions were valid or good enough. Whereas now, I think it would be quite different.

-Excerpt from interview with Manal (2)

It is evident, then, that when given space to contribute and share their opinions, the feeling that readers as individuals matter in intellectual spaces, is one that stays with them. And sadly, so too is the reverse.

Jane, who identifies as an atheist, recalled contributing to seminars discussing Eve frequently. The 25-year-old remembered sharing her perspective as a woman and stated that

her connection with characters such as Eve and Sin came from an interest in gender and feminist readings:

*Eve is the only character that rivals Satan in my affection. Her role in this is far more fascinating than Adam's. Her language beguiling. Immediately we see her with some force of independence preferring her own reflection to Adam. She names the plants and tends to the garden. Her absence is incongruous in the discourse between Adam and the angel visitor. Her desire to work further abroad is intrepid and well reasoned, the glimmer of lust for power is compelling to a C21st woman: 'for inferior who is free?'. Perhaps it is impossible for me to read without a feminist lens, especially as I have no sympathy for the theological aspect of her character. Her selfishness to drag Adam down as well so they can always be together no matter what hell is so flawed and spectacular, as well as moving and sensitively wrought. Her strength in the face of Adam's cruelty makes her more remarkable than her husband. Overall I think her character is far more interesting, eloquent, and sympathetic to me as a modern woman than Adam's.*

- Jane

In contrast to the previous participants, Jane has no spiritual affiliation with any telling of Eve's story yet viewed Eve as a beacon of female power and strength. This is opposed by Mariyah, a British Pakistani Muslimah who shared:

*This is a character which frustrates me. It depicts women as vain, unintelligent and lacking common sense. It shows how one compliment from Satan gets her so happy*



*that she's willing to listen to a stranger and eat the apple. Eve is shown as an inferior character, which is relevant to today's age where women are fighting for equal rights.*

- Mariyah

Both Jane and Mariyah referenced the struggles of the 21<sup>st</sup> century woman, yet Maryiah's damning analysis showed no mercy toward Milton's Eve. For her, Eve was emblematic of all that was wrong with how women are portrayed. This view was further expressed by the fact that Muslimah participants in the study selected the word "inferior" most frequently to describe the poem's first woman. A triggering topic for many female readers individuals across the sample was this question of Eve's intellect. However, for Shireena, who identifies as a Hindu, there was no contest as she deemed Milton "forward-thinking" in his portrayal:

*Eve is the character I love best. To me, it is remarkable how Milton wrote Eve--she has the greatest human maturity of everyone (certainly more than Adam or God), thinks in terms of solutions and love (it is she who first thinks to ask for God's mercy, it is she who initiates prayer and the ask for forgiveness), and embodies the greatest kindness in human terms. For a character created to \*be inferior\*--because female (see, for instance, Book 4, l. 299) -- Eve is a remarkably complex, intelligent, kind, and forward-thinking. Sort of the best of humankind. And I don't think all this is just inadvertent. Milton is a very careful writer. Neither Satan's attractiveness, nor Eve's maturity, is an accident.*

- Shireena

Feelings of admiration for Eve's attributes were not shared by British biracial Muslimah Alya, who was displeased with the portrayal:

*I was disappointed with the characterisation of Eve in Paradise Lost being depicted almost as intellectually inferior to Adam. I remained unmoved with this character as the poem progressed, since, if Eve had been more on par with Adam intellectually, she may have tried to persuade him not to follow her decision to eat the forbidden fruit. This may have been interesting.*

- Alya

Unlike Shireena, Alya did not deem Eve as “forward-thinking”, but perceived her as a regressive figure, namely due to what she recognised as an inferior intellectual state. The British Scottish-Pakistani reader took issue with the poem primarily for this reason arguing that if Eve was made from man, it would have made more sense that “she would be reasonable and would think more carefully than she does about eating the forbidden fruit”. Throughout her reading experiences, Alya maintained that Milton’s Eve seemed to be presented as merely “an object of male desire” and found the poem’s gender roles typical and unsurprising:

Alya: I didn’t find the discussions about women that intriguing because I thought they were quite predictable. I think Eve is quite predictably represented, in most cases, as inferior to Adam. I was hoping that there would be more instances where she wouldn’t be. And the only instance where she is portrayed as slightly deviant... it’s not really deviant, but she’s in the garden talking to Adam and she says we should split up and go our own ways and we’ll get more of our work done. And then Adam says, no I don’t want you to do that, stay with me. I think that’s the only instance that

I can think of where she wasn't represented as a stereotypical submissive woman. So yeah, that wasn't too interesting.

-Excerpt from interview with Alya

Christian reader Natasha was frustrated by Milton's "misogyny" which she believed informed his portrait of Eve. Like Alya, she took note of Eve's act of wanting to work independently, but states that such behaviours were "tainted" with "negative undertones":

*I found Eve in Paradise Lost interesting. How I felt about Eve changed at points throughout the poem. Even where there were points at which I liked how she was represented they all ultimately became tainted because for me, the negative undertones behind these behaviours were obvious. For example, I liked her independence of thought yet, this just led to her suggestion that her and Adam to go off and work separately which lays the ground for the Fall to happen. I disliked the lengthy descriptions of her unfathomable beauty as that was the only attribute she was really given. Even then, it was another factor contributing to the flaws in her character as she is compared to Narcissus. Eve is given no opportunity for the greater sense of redemption that Adam is given. She is not handed the intellect like he is. I think in his elaboration of Eve's character in the early books; her questioning mind, her intense vanity and her apparent dismissal of Adam. Milton is creating a figure whose mind is being exercised in all the wrong ways. This then perhaps allows somewhat of an explanation for the chronology of the Fall as is told in Genesis, that it is Eve who falls first. Milton is showing why she falls.*

- Natasha

Though this reader claimed to understand Milton's logic to some extent, she stated that she did not agree with the characterisation. In particular, Natasha strongly opposed "Eve's submission in Books 11 and 12" as she felt the first woman was silenced, which in effect, meant unnecessarily "stripping her away from everything important". Nonetheless, the modern reader shared that whilst there were views in *Paradise Lost* that she absolutely disagreed with, some of her difficulty and frustration was taken away when she remembered that these stances reflected seventeenth-century thinking. A similar tone of dissatisfaction was noticeable in Muslimah reader Maysa's response as she also commented on Milton's context and gender roles in the poem:

*Eve was disappointing to read because she acted more leisurely than Adam. There's a moment when Adam sits with I think Gabriel or another Angel, and Eve skips away not paying attention. So when I read that I interpreted it as Milton suggesting that women are not to be included in "intellectual circles" or conversations between men. What I think is interesting, is because I understand Genesis from the Bible, and how it has been reinterpreted by English authors throughout history, I was thinking about how this representation of Eve is very telling of Milton as an English writer, and how he's iterating common perspectives about women in English literature.*

- Maysa

For Maysa, Eve was perceived as a passive and careless figure who in choosing not to converse in intellectual discussions, did not properly utilise her autonomy. This differs from other reader responses across the wider sample who viewed Eve as more of an ostracised figure that was purposely excluded due to her sex. Maysa's interpretation of Eve was fused with her understanding of Islamic tradition as she went on to reference the idea of "modesty":

[...] when Adam and Eve, after eating from the Tree of Knowledge, recognize that they're not wearing clothes and they gather some leaves to cover themselves. It was really interesting to see a concept of modesty being posited by Milton here, and it made me reflect on Islam's teachings of modesty. And in this scene, Adam and Eve's immodesty is a result of shame, so their sexuality is kind of being demonized? [...] gender and sexuality are intertwined in so many ways and I think this scene is one that shows that.

- Maysa

Though Maysa admitted to suppressing her Islamic insight in class as she feared it may be frowned upon and considered inappropriate, her insight on modesty and nakedness reveals that her mental practise of comparing cultures gave her much to reflect on.

Ansar, a British-Kashmiri Muslimah also regarded Eve as intellectually inferior to Adam in *Paradise Lost*, but did so while expressing sympathy:

*I was quite sympathetic towards her and felt sorry for her, especially at the start. She is supposed to be less intelligent than Adam but this is to be expected as she [sic.] excluded from the conversations that he has with Raphael. It doesn't suggest that she is unwilling to learn as she does have the conversations with Adam later, but it's sad how she feels like it's not her place to be a part of those conversations. In the text, Eve is strong when she's with Adam and makes a good team with him - the one time she makes her own decision (to split up), it is disastrous. She comes across as quite vain and that's what ultimately becomes her fall. Is Milton suggesting that women make positive influences/choices when with their partners within marriage?*

- Ansar

While Alya regarded the separation scene in Book 9 as illustrative of power and control, for Ansar, it was a symbol for disaster. The notion of Eve being excluded from intellectual conversations was something that generated feelings of sadness for Ansar, as it did for Grace. This was further explored during our interview, which led the British-Kashmiri reader to reveal that as a Muslim, “so many elements” of *Paradise Lost*’s portrayal of the first woman made her feel uncomfortable including Eve being “frozen out” of intelligent conversations, “the fact that she was vain, and how the whole thing was her fault”. Ansar, who I regard a ‘cultural accommodator’ stressed her discomfort by paralleling her understandings of both the Qur’anic and Miltonic narratives:

Ansar: I know it falls back on the Christian narrative, but, in the Islamic narrative, it’s not like that at all. So that is uncomfortable but that is the way the story is. So, it’s just understanding the Christian story and respecting it. That’s just their narrative.

-Excerpt from interview with Ansar

For male, Catholic respondent Joseph, personal understandings of religious scripture were also relied upon as he reached his judgement:

*I am very sympathetic towards Milton's Eve. She is charming, kind, intelligent. She is not at all a lesser character than Adam, even if the poem sometimes suggests this is the case. The temptation scene does not show her at her best, to be sure, and I reject when people say she had good reason to eat of the fruit. Even if she desired to be equal with Adam (which would be understandable) she quickly gives up on this when*

*she has actually eaten the fruit and tries to get Adam to join her by batting her eyelashes in a way far more self-demeaning than any of her expressions of love or devotions were before. I understand people's frustration that Eve's fault is pride, as it is something often used to slander women, but then the masculine Satan is also prideful. Overall, I am very fond of Eve, perhaps more than the poem would like me to be.*

- Joseph

From this account, it is apparent that Joseph compartmentalises what the poem “suggests”, and what he understands. The devout Christian reader declared that he stood by “newer readings of the Genesis account which point out that, despite what tradition would say, Eve is not really depicted as being more guilty than Adam at all or weaker”. Colouring his readerprint as a result, Joseph remarked that he was “more than happy to dismiss some of Milton's depiction of Eve as wrong and continuing a damaging tradition”. As Joseph recognised that elements of sexism toward the first woman exist in *Paradise Lost*, he wrote:

*I certainly don't care how Eve is looked down upon, although I think some part of Milton also doesn't care for that, because he made her so interesting and human. The poem's sympathies are mixed so perhaps it is only problematic in the way that questions about gender in Milton's time and ours is problematic and multifaceted.*

- Joseph

What we see in Joseph’s case is an instance of where religious interpretation bypasses the Miltonic narrative to give an overall positive impression on Eve’s characterisation. This differed from respondents such as previously mentioned Rachel who saw the character in

*Paradise Lost* as a by-product of the Bible's misinterpretation, leading her to have a more conflicted, and critical observation of Milton's Eve.

Also looking upon Eve favourably was Miguel, another Christian male reader:

*Eve is supremely sympathetic as perhaps the truest embodiment of Milton's ideals. She is whip-smart, palatably independent, courteous, and beautiful. In short, she has all the qualities you'd expect of an epic hero Milton is constructing. Of course early modern ideas about what a woman ought to be like and ought to do sneak in to complicate this picture of her, but to me (and I think in Milton's imagination) the prevailing image is of a person who is admirable in every sense of the word.*

- Miguel

Noting the influence of his surroundings where an awareness of sexism was at an “all-time-high”, Miguel recognised that he had been more careful about reading Eve than he probably would have been had he grown up in a different society. Interestingly, when it came to allocating blame for the fall in the poem, the Christian reader selected Satan, Adam, and Eve, but did not designate fault to God. Miguel's rationale for choosing Eve was the following:

*Eve, despite being misled, ought to have deferred to the moral knowledge she has: that God has revealed himself to be good, and where her understanding doesn't line up with that, she should respond with trust and obedience, and at the very least consult with Adam. Instead she initiates the fall, not just by believing the serpent, but by not believing God.*

- Miguel



This description complicates Miguel's previous statement that Eve was "admirable in every sense of the word" as he problematised her behaviour and did not find her admirable in her actions. These conflicting ideas reveal that Miguel displayed selective rationale in his questionnaire and applied his reasoning rather inconsistently in his analysis. Nonetheless, this, alongside a reluctance to criticise God the Father and Son, revealed that Miguel's religious and social background had indeed shaped his readerprint. By contrast, Stuart, who identified as being a lapsed Christian, offered a heavy critique of God the Father and Son, and favoured Milton's Eve:

*Eve was shown to be narcissistic [sic.] from the moment she was shown her reflection, but I do not believe that that is a bad part of her character. Eve was one of the more interesting characters in Paradise Lost in that she thought for herself most of the time. From trimming the Garden and deciding that children would help the work go smoother, she became more likeable to me personally. She was also left out from many important discussions, having to overhear [sic.] them to gain any understanding. She herself was an outcast in a sense, despite living in the perfect place. God and the Angels talked to Adam because he was a man, the leader in a sense. Her rebelling and listening [sic.] to Satan is no error in her part as someone is finally treating her as an equal in my mind.*

- Stuart

Like Jane, Ansar, and Alya, Stuart was also left with the impression that Eve was excluded from important intellectual conversations. Describing the character as an "outcast" yet an independent thinker, the first woman won Stuart's approval as he reflected on how it was "freeing for Eve to know of her sexuality" and "to know she is beautiful". The 22-year-old,

who himself identified as being asexual, expressed how women were normally made to feel inferior the moment they started being sexual in society, so to see a biblical figure perceive it as normal was “refreshing”. While clarifying his decision to designate blame to God and not Eve or Satan; and acknowledging the influence of his unique social, cultural, and religious formation, Stuart shared:

*I believe that because I was raised to see people for the actions they take, it has shown me that God was a very bad being and that Satan and Eve were justified in the actions they took.*

- Stuart

British-Pakistani Muslimah, Riya, who I categorise as ‘the contrarian’, also perceived Eve to be “narcissistic” but recalls changing her opinion the more she read of the poem:

*At first, my own take on Eve is that she is quite vain and narcissistic as I only read a summary of her own role in Paradise Lost. However, upon reading, I found her to be someone that is quite personable, intellectual [sic.] and also emotional. She does not seem as engaged as Adam is to learn about the world and heed advice, but she does seem more carefree in her own exploration of the world – for example, when she looks into her reflection for the first time. I think that Eve is represented fairly as – like Adam – she has some negative traits but also positive ones. As a religious person, seeing Eve be reflected and exhibit traits such as being overemotional and impulsive, seem very human but also reassuring in a way. I became more sympathetic to her plight when she was considering ending her own life as she realizes the ramification*

*of her own actions. Yet she redeems herself by submitting fully to her own punishment and becoming determined to stand next to Adam as equals.*

- Riya

In comparison to the majority of the Muslimah participants in this study, Milton's Eve was found to be a comforting and relatable figure whom Riya perceived as intelligent, favourable, and redemptive. Unlike the other minority readers, Riya was not angered or disturbed by the first woman's portrayal, but felt reassured in seeing a flawed religious figure. In fact, the only instance that Riya expressed slight discomfort with the poem was when the human couple's sexual nature was explored. Riya stressed that this was not due to her being a Muslim, but her own orientation as an asexual person:

Riya: But yeah that's why I was really really uncomfortable with the sexual nature of it. I don't really get it if that makes sense. I didn't really find it interesting or needed in the book really. Because it doesn't really take away from the fact of what they did. But I also understand why Milton did do that because he wants to make sex not scary I guess.

-Excerpt from interview with Riya

This reveals the unmistakable effect of varying parts of an individual's intersectional identity - including that of sexuality - which has the power to frame and influence a reader's interpretation in various ways.

Discomfort surrounding the poem's sexual nature was also experienced by British-Pakistani respondent Sannah, who, unlike Riya, did associate it with her religious formation:

Sannah: [...] the naivety and sexualisation of Eve, that was slightly uncomfortable. Only because, in religious terms, I had never considered that, or been taught that. Or even read anything like that. So that was interesting- I was aware of the Lilith legend, and such, so, by having those Lilith characteristics placed on Eve after she ate the apple, I was very hyper aware of her hyper sexualisation.

-Excerpt from interview with Sannah

Sannah's analysis of Eve in the questionnaire was loaded with sharp, unsympathetic observations as she described the first woman as:

*Narcissistic. Half Adam's. All her own. Preferring her own company the more she sees of Heaven. For a few moments, preferring the company of the serpent to Adam. Beguiled. Gluttonous, for knowledge, for beauty, for individuality. Weeping. Fiery. Naked in her intentions. Fallen. Blamed.*

- Sannah

The 24-year-old who I consider a 'cultural accommodator' noted that gender was "disproportionate" and "partly biased" in *Paradise Lost* as the majority of the characters were male figures who were portrayed as good; whereas the female figures of Eve and Sin were depicted as "either hideous, unlawful, fallen, Hellish or rebellious". Despite this, Sannah acknowledged (though did not pledge herself to the case), that an argument can be made that Milton presented Eve as a "strong female character" who was "strong willed" and "resolute".

Another reader who noticed the parallels between Eve and Sin was Stacey:

*[...] the only other female character is Sin, so it's interesting to pair the two of them together. I feel sorry for Sin, she is essentially raped by her son and nothing is her fault, she is the product of Satan's envy. Also, I think that it's interesting how she is generated from the left side of Satan's head in the same way that Eve is created from Adam's left rib, again mirroring the two characters and intensifying the issues about gender and sexuality.*

- Stacey

This Christian reader reflected on the gender dynamics of the poem and shared though she considered both Adam and Eve as blameworthy for the Fall, she did not appreciate Eve being presented “more negatively” than Adam. This led her to be critical of the balance of responsibility in the poem which did not “rest easy” with this reader. Elsewhere, Milton’s Eve was interpreted differently for atheist reader Suzie who regarded the character “intelligent” and “painstakingly human” as she longed for equality which was something that “women have fought for many generations”. Alongside this, Angela, another atheist respondent, commented that she had a mixed reaction while reading Milton’s Eve:

*I do not find her likeable, but I am sympathetic. As with Adam, I am put off by the implications of her characterisation (e.g. her implied gullibility, the emphasis on appearance over intelligence). It's hard to divorce her character from the wider social context within which her character traits exist, especially nowadays. In many ways Genesis feels like a biblical justification that asserts the inherently inferior status of women as ordained by a deity, which I strongly disagree with (and find even more irritating due to its real-world impact). I know some critics have argued about a sort of compatibility between Adam and Eve, but I'm not buying it.*

- Angela

Angela's non-religious background was something that she herself acknowledged as an influencing factor in her response. It is important to note, however, that for many of the female respondents, the "real world" implications of gender representation that Angela speaks of came to dominate responses *across* the entire sample. The part played by gender is thus unmistakably distinctive as female readers understandably struggled to separate the poem's portrayal of Eve from its context and consequences in both Milton's time, and our own – which explains why there had been such insightful, emotional, and animated reactions towards this character.

Despite all the reservations and resistance explored thus far towards Milton's Eve, 26-year-old Nusayba, the final Muslimah participant in this sample, was unique in her observation that Eve was beyond doubt equal to Adam:

*Alongside Adam, she actively chose to be tempted by Satan and sin. As has been argued by Feminists, she's presented as lacking in objective knowledge. However, I've interpreted that she is in fact presented in an equal fashion to Adam. This is based upon them being equal upon their differences rather than how well they replicate each other. I found her character compelling and more to her than what current research depicts of her.*

- Nusayba

This fascinating take was something I interrogated further during my in-person interview with the British biracial Pakistani and Egyptian Muslimah:

Nusayba: I was observing and looking into was the relationship between Adam and Eve. And who was in power and who wasn't in power, and whether Adam was seen as patriarchal or not.

Eva: What did you conclude?

Nusayba: No. I don't believe he was. I believe Eve was given her power in a very different way and in fact, my interpretation of the text was that it was very much upon the fact that women and men are different but they're equal. So it's more about mutuality between the genders rather than equality.

Eva: That's a very Muslim perspective!

Nusayba: Yeah, this is the point that I was making. To further my research, I'll definitely be looking at how it relates to Islam.

-Excerpt from interview with Nusayba (1)

This segment can serve as a standalone example of why Nusayba was categorised as belonging to “the conformist” personality group as her readerprint had heavily and continuously been influenced her by religious formation. Interestingly, she was also influenced by the views of her Muslim tutor who aligned with McColley's view that the human pair operated on a basis of mutuality in the poem.<sup>6</sup> It is, of course, inevitable that whom someone is taught by has a shaping effect on their views and interpretation of the

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<sup>6</sup> Diane K. McColley, 'Milton and the Sexes', in *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*, ed. by Dennis Danielson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 175-192.

poem. In this case, Nusayba adheres to her Muslim tutor's interpretation and belongs to this ancestry.

Eva: Who would you say was in power?

Nusayba: I personally just generally felt like they were equal. They both did different things and they're not comparable. You can't compare them at all. Just things like her having different hair and the way she was described compared to Adam. But it's a male and it's a female, and that's genuinely what my perspective was. Yeah maybe I came down with my subjective concepts and brought it to the text, but who isn't doing that?

-Excerpt from interview with Nusayba (2)

The 26-year-old stressed the importance of welcoming readings from different multicultural backgrounds and emphasised that there was "no actual objective understanding of this text" as everything was contingent on societal pressures and expectations at any given moment. By sharing a space where this viewpoint was welcomed, Nusayba's enthusiasm was plainly obvious as we laughed often, and revelled in her Islamic reflections during the interview:

Eva: There's a bit that I really loved in your questionnaire where I asked if you're aware of the story of creation in the Qur'an, and if it influences your reading and understanding of the poem, and you said: "maybe so in relation to the aspect of sin being more tempting than doing good. In particular, how actions away from Islam are easily done in comparison to maybe doing good, e.g., wearing hijab vs not wearing



hijab in today's society. It was easier for Adam and Eve to eat from the tree than to resist it”.

Nusayba: Definitely, because we're told in Islam how this world is a paradise for non-believers but full of temptations. And when He first created paradise, all the angels came back and said that was amazing, everyone's gonna wanna go there. But then He surrounded it with tests and tribulations and loads and loads of hardships and temptations. And the angels came back and said that they feared that no one will get into paradise because of how hard it was to get in and how easy it was to get into hell. So that's the first thought that came into my head, that actually...it's not a rosy road! And it IS harder. Like, would you not be tempted? Oh there's an apple that's apparently gonna give you AMAZING knowledge.

Eva: I'd 100% eat it

Nusayba: [laughing] YEAH! Something that makes you God-like! You're gonna wanna eat it.

Eva: Honestly, I think I'd do it without Satan [both laughing]

-Excerpt from interview with Nusayba (3)

In essence, then, Nusayba displayed a different perspective to not only the other Muslimah participants in the study (thus further illustrating that Muslim readers do not belong to one homogenous group), but to all respondents in the wider sample. By actively negotiating her Islamic religious and cultural background with her reading of *Paradise Lost*, the biracial

British Muslimah was able to reach a place of resolution whereby she saw Adam and Eve as mutual, and equal beings.

In conclusion, it is not difficult to understand why Leonard stated that Milton's views on women have always provoked dissent.<sup>7</sup> Though controversy on Eve's characterisation has certainly existed in the voices of critics within the pages of our academic books, sometimes, we need not look any further than at the spaces in our classrooms, where we will undoubtedly find unique readers, each with their own distinct readerprints. As this chapter on Eve has illustrated, intellectual engagement with the poem has been profoundly coloured by the social, cultural, and religious formations of Milton's modern-day readers. For the most part, this has explained why many of the female Muslim readers had such an adverse, and often critical reaction toward the first woman's portrayal in the poem; and why overall, men who participated in this reception study had less of an animated reaction towards the character of Eve in comparison to their female counterparts. Indeed, it was an exploration of Eve's characterisation that revealed the clearest and most striking differences of opinion between the Muslim and non-Muslim readers. The majority of Muslimah readers were recognisably dissatisfied, unmoved, and hypercritical of Eve as they naturally paralleled the Miltonic and Qur'anic narratives. As well as their religious backgrounds informing their views, participants' gender identities played a crucial role in their interpretations. Given the current cultural climate where women's positions in Islam are publicly speculated upon, these female Muslim readers' efforts to take control and reclaim the narrative by explaining the Islamic take on Eve where she is revered and not blamed, is understandable. When Muslimah readers felt comfortable, they shared their dislike of the character's portrayal in their educational contexts, which can be recognised as subtle attempts to dismantle negative and sexist stereotypes on Muslim women and reshape the socio-cultural norms of the times we live in.

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<sup>7</sup> Leonard, p. 703.

With non-Muslim respondents, however, we saw that they were far more sympathetic and comfortable with Eve's portrayal. This can be attributed to the different vantage points of participants, as most Muslimah readers were navigating a poetic adaptation that they perceived to be a false representation of the first woman that they believe in. While comparatively, non-Muslim readers found it easier to reconcile that Milton was writing in a different time, from which, much has changed since. Despite these differences, there were, nonetheless, commonalities and conversational trends between readers across all sample groups where they shared gender, sexuality, or western understandings of patriarchy, power, and control. Lastly, and most importantly, when reading *Paradise Lost*, the benefits of considering interfaith dialogue and multicultural encounters in education is invaluable. As demonstrated in this study, once the views of more minority readers are invited and welcomed into academic spaces, our understandings of works, and of the people who read them, can only ever be enhanced.

### **Part 3: Teaching *Paradise Lost* in UK Higher Education**

## **Teaching *Paradise Lost* in UK Higher Education**

As reflected in Part 2: Reader Responses to *Paradise Lost*, the unique intersectional identities of modern-day respondents left distinct imprints on their interpretations of the poem. An exploration of this allowed us rich and vibrant insight into the different reading experiences of readers from a non-traditional and marginal group. When uncovering how readerprints form and operate, another crucial variable to consider is the educational environment in which readers are exposed to the poem, which has a significant impact on their ‘reading event’.<sup>1</sup> To date, no research has looked comparatively at how universities shape their courses on Milton. To this end, this chapter draws upon twelve semi-structured interviews conducted with tutors who teach Milton at nine different UK higher education institutions. It will reflect on their varying pedagogical practices, their reactions to the UK’s rapidly changing socio-political climate, and their approach to working with students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds (BAME) in their institutions. The nine universities that participated in the tutor interviews were from: five Russell Group universities in the Southwest, Northeast, West Midlands, East Midlands, and London; three plate glass universities in the East Midlands, West Midlands, and North West; and one post-1992 university in the East Midlands.<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that the UK experienced a range of events that were culturally significant during the conduct of this study, including Brexit, the COVID-19 global pandemic, and the Black Lives Matter movement. In effect, a renegotiation

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<sup>1</sup> Louise M. Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration*, 5th edn (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1995), p. 204.

<sup>2</sup> I have used the Department of Education schema of four age groups: i.e., ancient (pre-1800), red brick (1800-1960), plate glass (1960-1992), and post-1992. For institutions that have been categorised as Russell Group, this is because the research intensiveness of an HEI is often more determinative of its educational culture and approach than simply the length of time since its establishment. See Peter Blyth and Arran Clewinson, ‘Teaching Excellence Framework: analysis of highly skilled employment outcomes’, Department for Education (September 2016)

<[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/557107/Teaching-Excellence-Framework-highly-skilled-employment..pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/557107/Teaching-Excellence-Framework-highly-skilled-employment..pdf)> [accessed on 18 August 2023].

of the education sector was taking place nationwide, leading policy makers, educators, and students to review many of their practices. This meant that tutors commenting on their teaching of Milton during interviews in 2020 and 2022 were often evaluating with these specific challenges in mind.

The Office of National Statistics reports that university entrants for individuals from BAME communities are steadily increasing each year. This is reflected in most recent data which show that while the percentage of White students enrolling in higher education decreased from 76% in 2017/2018 to 73% in 2021/2022; it remained steady at 8% for Black students and increased from 11% to 12% for Asian students in the same years.<sup>3</sup> When looking at what discipline these students chose, data also reveals that there has been an increase in the number of students studying English Literature from BAME backgrounds.<sup>4</sup> Though we cannot say precisely how many went on to study Milton, these figures correspond with the conversations had with Early Modern tutors across the country who have noticed an increase in the number of BAME students in their classes. For instance, in this study's interview sample of UK universities engaging with Milton in their English Literature courses, only one tutor from the Russell Group university in the Southwest reported a lack of diversity and no Muslim students in his current cohort of first-year undergraduates. Though this was not the case every year, Martin, a senior lecturer at the university shared:

Martin: [Russell Group university in the Southwest] is not as diverse as Birmingham by any stretch of the imagination, and I don't think it's even as diverse in terms of our

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<sup>3</sup> HESA: Higher Education Statistics Agency, *HE student enrolments by personal characteristics - Academic years 2017/18 to 2021/22* (January 2023) <<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he#characteristics>> [accessed 19 February 2023].

<sup>4</sup> HESA: Higher Education Statistics Agency, *Table 45 - UK domiciled HE student enrolments by subject of study and ethnicity* (January 2023) <<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-45>> [accessed 7 February 2023].

undergraduate cohort as Cambridge... even there.<sup>5</sup> So, the answer is yes there has been a variety of students from different faiths and backgrounds, but it's not a huge variety unfortunately. Despite our best efforts to make [Russell Group university in the Southwest] a more diverse place, it's still very lacking in that respect.

-Excerpt from interview with Martin (1)

As admissions officer, Martin was acutely aware that the Southern university is predominantly made up of students from white, middle-class backgrounds. This sharply contrasts to Midland institutions where higher numbers of students from BAME communities decide to study, leading Vivian, an associate professor at a Russell Group university in the East Midlands to reflect that "most classes have Muslim students". Though this may be the case, it is important to note that in the Midlands, there are noticeable differences between the ethnic diversity of student cohorts in humanities subjects in Russell Group universities and post-1992 universities where the ethnic diversity is much greater. Nonetheless, reflecting on the diversity of classes at a Russell Group university in the West Midlands, Jeremy, a professor of English Literature mentioned that though the majority of students in his classes were ethnically white and British, in his experience of teaching a third-year module dedicated to *Paradise Lost*, there was still a rich range of students from multi-faith backgrounds who enrolled on the course:

Jeremy: I had students from different backgrounds and faiths. I mean, backgrounds can be socio-economic as well as ethnic and cultural. Obviously, nobody is making personal enquiries about the people in their group. But it becomes, or I hope that the atmosphere is such that the people are willing to volunteer and come and speak about

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<sup>5</sup> Martin had previously taught at Cambridge.

their identity and not try to conceal that but feel that it is a strength somehow. So yes, I would say, on the faith question, probably the majority of students come from what you call a long-term residual Christian culture, but not necessarily believing. So they may be self-declared atheists, but, somewhere in their cultural background they'll know what the Lord's prayer is and they'll know the Bible stories, which may have been hard to escape in the schools they'd been to. Then there are people from different faiths, undoubtedly, from the Abrahamic religions, Jewish students, Muslim students. I'm not always aware of what particular school or group that those students might come from, in Islam, Sunni or Shia, or even more narrowly defined than that. Or with my Jewish students, how many are reform, or how many are more strict. But there have undoubtedly been a variety. But generally speaking, the majority are ethnically white, British with some Christian background, if not of Christian faith. The other thing I'll quickly say about gender, what I've increasingly been aware of in recent years is that gender identity has become more and more fluid. And, in the last couple of years I've had students who haven't really been comfortable with binary.

-Excerpt from interview with Jeremy (1)

Jeremy's creation of an enabling environment meant that students often felt sufficiently comfortable in seminars to volunteer information about their religious and cultural formations. Interestingly, students' willingness to share this information was not so obvious in other cases where tutors displayed a sense of hesitancy when asked to comment on their backgrounds. While all tutors shared a motivation to create an inclusive learning environment for their students; for Lyra, who is a lecturer at a plate glass university in the East Midlands, her teaching technique meant that insight on her students' identities was limited as she avoided asking them direct questions:



Eva: In your experience of teaching *Paradise Lost*, are you aware of there been any Muslim students present in your classes?

Lyra: I am aware of it. Yeah, absolutely. For sure, but I don't... I absolutely respond to student demeanour, and I don't even ask questions directly to individuals. There are times when you're teaching topics and you think gosh, I'm sure this student will say something about this and I sometimes wish I could just take them one to one and go like, I know you were thinking things! But that's not part of my teaching technique.

-Excerpt from interview with Lyra (1)

Lyra added that over the last several years where she had taught various modules on the epic, she could not recall any instances of “students from ethnic minorities of any kind” submitting work on *Paradise Lost*. Referring to the “competitive system” at the East Midland institution where the students selected their modules, Lyra shared that a lack of student participation in her third-year optional course on Milton eventually led to it being discontinued after two years.

Contrastingly, in the USA, Greenberg and Williamson recorded positive engagement with Milton from students of colour through their practice of ‘caucusing’ in the online classroom. Caucusing is a term used to describe a supportive discussion environment that builds from the students’ shared experiences of identity, and moves students through a set of different identity-based groups, inviting them to consider their positionality from multiple standpoints.<sup>6</sup> Greenberg expressed it being ‘impossible to discuss Milton without talking

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<sup>6</sup> Marissa Greenberg and Elizabeth Williamson, 'Caucusing in the Online Literature Classroom', in *Teaching Literature in the Classroom*, ed. by John Miller and Julie Wilhelm (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2022), pp. 125-126.

about race, gender, and sexuality’, emphasising that ‘neutrality is not an option’ for tutors or students.<sup>7</sup> In order to build on various experiences, Greenberg and Williamson made enquiries about the intersectional identities of students through ‘anonymous positionality surveys’ which helped to facilitate focussed discussion during classes. In turn, the carefully scaffolded activities helped to prepare students for larger, more open-ended discussions that culminated in encounters with alternative understandings and viewpoints. Greenberg and Williamson concluded that pairing safe dialogue with ‘more reflective, intersectional analysis generates both productive intergroup dialogue and deep literary knowledge’.<sup>8</sup> Learning in a Milton classroom was thus understood to be an ‘alliance’ between all readers. This voluntary and anonymous practice of filling out a positionality survey can certainly be adopted in online and in-person seminars on *Paradise Lost* in the UK, as it would encourage willing students to share information on intersectional elements relevant to their own reading experiences. By accommodating such views, as well as providing a more pronounced interpretative safe space, it would also spark new ideas in educators on how they can adapt their teaching to honour everyone in the room.

In cases of increased participation from Muslim students in UK higher education, Rose, a senior lecturer at a Russell Group university in the Northeast recalled there being one “very confident” Muslimah in her class:

Rose: Now the Muslim student that I did have actually was very informative in that she was able to talk about parallels that she found between Milton and the Qur’an, and she was quite a confident young woman and was therefore able to hold the attention of the group to talk about it and it was an absolute delight to have her there because

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<sup>7</sup> Marissa Greenberg, ‘Caucusing in the Milton Classroom’, paper delivered at the conference ‘Renaissance Society of America 68th Annual Meeting’, (Dublin, 30 March - 2 April 2022). This was later published (see citation above).

<sup>8</sup> Marissa Greenberg and Elizabeth Williamson, pp. 127-130.

that really expanded everyone's knowledge. Her contributions really informed discussions and it was really positive for the group.

-Excerpt from interview with Rose (1)

Rose's account of this female Muslim student has similarities with a number of Muslimah respondents in this study who also made frequent parallels between the Qur'anic and Miltonic traditions. In this instance, we see a clear example of how interfaith dialogue aided class discussion by enhancing the understanding and quality of conversation for the wider group. In another example, Savannah, a senior lecturer from a Russell Group university in London reflected upon a time where Muslimah students used their religious formation to inform their reading experience of another early modern poem:

Savannah: [...] the first thing that springs to mind is, my most kind of vivid experience of all these backgrounds affecting seminar discussions actually occurred not when I was teaching Milton, but when I was teaching Herbert at Queen Mary. And I was teaching his poem *Prayer (1)* and I'd kind of got ready by thinking... so the class was made up of mostly Muslim women, and I'd done a lot of preparation thinking there's going to be a lot of background that I have to explain around the theology and there's going to be quite a big gap in terms of experience, the world of the poem will feel very remote. And actually, that was not at all my experience [chuckles]. As soon as I got into the seminar room, the students absolutely loved the poem and I think felt enormous sympathy for a poem that was about prayer structuring one's life. And actually, the Muslim women that I was teaching the poem to had a much stronger response to it than lots of students from other backgrounds that I taught the poem to.

Eva: Oh wow.

Savannah: I know that's not immediately relevant, but I always have that example in my head when I'm teaching that poem, and as a reminder to myself not to presume that you have to have a background like Milton in order to appreciate Milton.

-Excerpt from interview with Savannah (1)

Savannah's recollection of teaching Herbert's devotional poem signifies another instance that Muslim students frequently connect with literary texts of a religious nature, which then has the potential to ignite deep introspection in them and produce valuable insight. When teaching her elective module on Milton, Savannah revealed that her top three students were from BAME backgrounds, which comprised two Black women and one British-Bengali Muslimah. Jeremy echoed this sentiment, referring to his experience of teaching *Paradise Lost* to Muslim students over the years who proved to be "wonderful students of the poem":

Jeremy: [...] time has taught me that Muslim students in the class are often more engaged at ALL levels of *Paradise Lost*, so not just with character, but religiously as well, and what a text might mean because religion might mean more in their lives than it does in the lives of those white, British, kind of atheist, lapsed Christians, and therefore that's closer to the Miltonic atmosphere of *Paradise Lost*. Often, they bring... almost a historical sense to the poem, without having to know the history because of the part their religion plays in their own lives and in their own culture. So for your next question, do they seem more or less engaged than other students? Yes, often times! [laughing] I mean, it's a general answer, of course, it's not always true,

and there are other students who have religion in their lives... or students who aren't religious at all, you can still be fascinated by the sorts of questions raised by *Paradise Lost* without being religious yourself. But I do think this question about the state of your soul and what's going to happen to you, your behaviours and beliefs, those things by and large still matter to the majority of Muslim students however or not observant they are, and that immediately puts them in touch with the poem in a different way than somebody who that is just not a question for them.

-Excerpt from interview with Jeremy (2)

Drawing on Jeremy's remarks, we understand then, that when the opportunity arises, Muslim students connect and engage with the poem in particularly profound ways. Morgan, an associate professor at a Russell Group university in the East Midlands noticed that students who wore the hijab often posed "a lot of engaged questions". When commenting on what her students least enjoyed discussing in *Paradise Lost*, Morgan observed that students often found it difficult to explore the historical and religious contexts of the poem. However, akin to Jeremy, she found that with Muslim students, engagement was heightened in this regard:

The people who struggle least with religious context seem to be anybody who is Christian, Muslim, or Jewish, because I think they've just been slightly more alert. First of all, 'they're people of the book' as it were, so they share religious backgrounds to some extent, so they're just a bit more alert to the ways that people can interpret or work with religious texts and, you know, to faith in general, maybe.

-Excerpt from interview with Morgan (1)

Conversely, Raven, a senior lecturer at a plate glass university in the Northwest held a different view, and shared that it was important to present *Paradise Lost* as “fictional” by discouraging students from reading the poem with their own religious standpoints in mind:

There might be on their side, a possible... they might have at the beginning, the thinking that their understanding of the text can be influenced by their faith because obviously we are talking about a fictionalised version of a biblical story. But I think that if you present the text in the right way then it's a piece of fiction, so it has to be appreciated for what it is.

-Excerpt from interview with Raven (1)

Curiously, I had a feeling that Raven thought I was investigating instances of students being offended by *Paradise Lost*. In any case, she revealed that this had never occurred in her seminars. When I inquired more directly about the diversity of students in Raven’s seminars, our interaction was the following:

Eva: How do you think that the composition of different seminar groups, taking into account, gender, socio economic background, race, culture, religion, might have informed seminar discussions, if at all?

Raven: I think it’s more on my part, trying to be aware and careful when I speak about Milton and *Paradise Lost*, not to offend anyone, but because we come from texts, like *King Lear* and like *Richard III*, where we are already tackling the issues of disability and illegitimacy, so they approach *Paradise Lost* with the understanding that we discuss what is within the text based on the experience of the writer who conceived

the text within a specific historical frame. So I've never had issues of people finding it offensive or irrelevant. And to be honest, even though it touches upon a religious narrative, like the biblical story of the creation, I think... [pause] Okay. They tend to say that English people get the history from Shakespeare and the religion from Milton.

Eva: Ha, interesting.

Raven: Yeah, which in a way is true. They probably know more about the story of the creation now because they've read Milton, rather than them reading the Bible.

Eva: Hm.

Raven: So that's definitely true. But to me, I always make sure at the beginning that they are aware of the fictional nature of the text. So we are not reading a historical account here, we are reading a fictionalised version of a story. So, we don't care about religious beliefs in order for them to appreciate the text because this is a fictionalised story. And so we try to approach the text that way. So it never happened to me but probably because I've prepared them to look at the text as a fictionalised text so it is something that must be considered for what it is and not for the implications that it has on the way religion is perceived for the student.

-Excerpt from interview with Raven (2)

Raven's approach is, very clearly, to emphasise the fictional nature of the text to her students. One reason for doing this is to take religion out of the interpretative equation: 'we don't care

about religious beliefs in order for them to appreciate the text because this is a fictionalised story'. This approach is also motivated by a desire to avoid any students taking offence at what they read in *Paradise Lost*. What is lost in this approach, however, are the generative and additive ways in which student awareness of their intersectional identities can inform and enhance their readings of the poem. By losing this important dimension of the diversity of the students reading the poem in the seminar, this tutor's approach also risks being less rather than more inclusive.

After posing the same question to Madelyn on whether the diversity of students' backgrounds had informed seminar discussions, the early career fellow at a Russell Group university in London reported:

Madelyn: I think it always does. I suppose you're always responding as a teacher or, you know, as anybody kind of leading any kind of discussion to a group of people, one always obviously tries to be responsive in the moment to who's there and what they might be. I definitely think as a teacher, you avoid making assumptions about people, of course [...] and that goes for all kinds of things, you know, you avoid assuming any particular kind of background you avoid assuming particular prior knowledge... I certainly, I mean, I'm teaching *Paradise Lost* and I'm not a Christian, I'm Jewish [...] and you know, there's a lot of biblical, New Testament stuff that I'm not that familiar with and I've had to learn about, and I would never assume that my students came to it with any particular knowledge of that tradition. So you know, a lot of the time, we're recognising in so many ways that Milton is writing out of a different worldview and from a different time and trying to sort of get to grips with that together, and I suppose recognising that people are coming at the poem from their



own different angles and bringing their own stories to bear on it and their own experiences.

-Excerpt from interview with Madelyn (1)

Attentive to the idea that by default, all Milton's modern-day readers are "quite removed from the text", Madelyn stated that much work had to be done to "close the gap between ourselves and Milton back then". As both a Jewish reader and educator, Madelyn's own unfamiliarity with certain aspects of the New Testament served as a reminder that not all students would be equipped with the same knowledge as each other. In attempting to bridge the gap between ourselves and Milton, studying *Paradise Lost* in the classroom context was thus understood to be a collaborative effort between both students and teacher:

Madelyn: [...] academically speaking, my students, what they've got in common is that they're all taking the *Paradise Lost* module, but they might have really different other intellectual interests and might be taking very different combination of modules. Like they might be more into modern literature, they might be really into old English or you know, I had students with all kinds of different intellectual backgrounds in the class as well. It's important to be mindful of that and that not everybody has a background in early modern literature, or you know, or in the history of the period or whatever it happens to be.

-Excerpt from interview with Madelyn (2)

In the event of understanding *Paradise Lost* in a classroom context, interfaith dialogue was believed to help facilitate the conversation at a Russell Group university in the East Midlands:

Vivian: I've had some interesting discussions... I'm just trying to think about... a student who is Muslim and talked about devils and different kind of cultural depictions in Christianity and Islam. And that was a really interesting thing. She's a mature student as well I should mention, so I think actually she might have had more confidence in bringing her own faith experience, because she was older, to the table. I haven't encountered that... I'm thinking of other Muslim students I've taught. I think that's probably the first time that someone has made a kind of comparative religions comment about *Paradise Lost*, but it was really intriguing actually and got the conversation going.

-Excerpt from interview with Vivian (1)

Overall, Vivian observed that Muslim students were very much engaged with the poem, and shared that her initial doubts on whether they would find it interesting were quickly settled:

Vivian: I had sometimes wondered whether they might actually find it off-putting to talk about a Christian myth of origins story, but I've never found that to be the case, I've always found an enthusiasm and engagement. And maybe, I don't know, talking from my faith tradition, because I'm a Christian, I've often found that there's that kind of common ground in sharing with the people of other faiths, that you get the idea of faith, or you get the idea of religious... you know there's certain things you can take as read about say ritual or the holy book, or all those kind of things that that you probably have more in common with than the non-believers. And I think, sorry that's just to answer from my own perspective, but I think that's what I would perceive that I think they, they often get very into it.

Eva: Yeah, because it's a shared Abrahamic narrative and although it's different in some places, they do share a lot.

Vivian: Yeah and that's interesting actually because [...] the case I can think of is that mature student where she has done that explicitly. But I suspect that there's probably a lot more implicitly whether they talk obviously about the shared narrative stories.

-Excerpt from interview with Vivian (2)

When investigating enthusiasm and engagement for the collective group in seminars, most tutors were united in reporting that for many of their students, who were predominantly female, topics relating to gender often dominated classroom conversation. Interestingly, this was the case regardless of which level the poem was being taught at. Reflecting as a Miltonist at a Russell Group institution in London, Savannah described discussions on the gender politics of *Paradise Lost* as “absolutely magnetic” in her seminars:

Savannah: We keep coming back to it. And I have a couple of weeks that are devoted to that topic, but it comes up more frequently than that. And there is perhaps a more animated response to questions of gender from women reading the poem.

-Excerpt from interview with Savannah (2)

Classroom discourse was also particularly memorable for Jeremy who said it was “pre-eminently and persistently popular” for his students who regularly found it “relevant and interesting”. In Jeremy’s seminars, gender politics related to the relationship between Adam and Eve took centre stage. Jeremy explained that this could be attributed to the fact that the

seminar groups in the module's cohorts were disproportionately female, estimating it to be around 70-80%. Despite this imbalance, the tutor announced that he was "glad that it's not all men" and pleased that it was something students enthusiastically discussed in class.

Elaborating further, the professor shared an instance where conversations on gender were brought into sharper focus:

Jeremy: [...] one student in particular, wanted me to be very clear about pronoun and use they instead of he/she. And that does throw another dimension into the conversation.

Eva: That's very interesting.

Jeremy: You know, a lot of us, especially when we are talking about feminism and female identity in relation to Eve... suddenly, even that conversation might start to seem a bit binary to those who are non-binary to think of it in a broader sense. That has been very much of a minority thing to date, but I can see that in the future becoming more of an interesting challenge to engage with.

Eva: How can people navigate that challenge? Should they try and bring about a new dimension in the conversation or, like you said, is it just about changing pronouns and being more attentive to different people in the classroom?

Jeremy: I think it's probably more far reaching than that. The challenge that has been thrown to us, or the prompt really, is to reconceive gender as not either/or, but as a spectrum. And then, to change the way we think about these conversations. And

obviously, Milton isn't thinking about gender fluidity particularly, so we need to be historically accurate, but nevertheless, we're critics in the present and shaped by our thinking. So I think it might be a bit more than just careful language use and pronouns, and perhaps thinking more about how identities are made up of lots and lots of things, and that they can change over time as well. I have to say, for this one student, it wasn't a great experience because they were struggling a lot anyway and so, wasn't present all of the time. I'm inclined to think that that's partly because the current environment in society and even in the classroom, means that that person still feels very very marginalised. I hope we try to navigate it better in the future. I hope that students don't feel judged, or feel that other people are unthinking or inconsiderate around them. We're trying to navigate this as a culture, aren't we? And as a society in general.

-Excerpt from interview with Jeremy (3)

Jeremy's comments show how some tutors frequently re-evaluate their approach in order to make the learning experience more inclusive for their students. Another male tutor who assessed the ways he approached the topic of gender was Martin at a Russell Group university in the Southwest, who reported that conversations did not always go according to plan:

Martin: I find gender really hard to teach in *Paradise Lost* because sometimes I feel like I just slightly lose the class and I end up kind of, [sighs] I end up trying to teach it as... or trying to persuade them that Milton is progressive for his time or whatever. You're at the backfoot as soon as you're teaching like that. So I think on some of those topics the classes can kind of go wrong. And there might be easier topics to

teach whereas people can see why it's a good poem. I think it's harder to teach why it's a good poem in terms of its gender politics or republicanism.

Eva: Do you think you lose the class because they are not convinced by the argument that Milton was progressive, or do you think that they're not interested in gender as much?

Martin: Ooh, good question. I think that's the point at which you would have to look at the makeup of particular classes. I mean, sometimes I lose the class because a couple of the people who I'd normally rely on haven't read it, for reasons like that. I think sometimes people who are, for very good reason, they just can't get past the fact that this is blaming everything on a woman. You know, that reading is valid and there's really good reason for why people would be like of course this isn't a progressive text about gender. I think there's no one reason why you would lose the class on that topic, but I think it's a difficult text to teach. Still, it's worth trying!

-Excerpt from interview with Martin (2)

Though Martin listed numerous variables that could have contributed to the classes' lack of engagement, upon further reflection, he added that when exploring the topic of gender during some seminars, he became hyperaware of his own male presence in the classroom.

Martin: I think sometimes, going back to the conversation that I was having earlier on about how my attempts to teach gender might go slightly wrong... I sometimes

overhear myself and think, okay, you're slightly mansplaining now [both laugh].<sup>9</sup> Like, oh no you have to understand that Milton is a progressive, you can take my word for it! And I think you can kind of end up in these situations where you're very aware that you're a guy at the front of the classroom who is teaching mainly women, and you're explaining what they should think about gender. I think a really good discussion doesn't feel like that and 9 out of 10 discussions that I have about gender in the classroom don't feel like that. [...] There's something about Milton's didacticism and the fact that you've got people in the classroom that have read this for the first time and they're aware of the fact that this is an incredibly long, complex poem and I've read it a hundred times. Well, I haven't but I'm not telling them that [laughs]. [...] That dynamic, I think, you start feeling like Milton himself or that you're trying to make up for him, or that you're an advocate or something like that... which I think is maybe the gender dynamic in the class.

-Excerpt from interview with Martin (3)

In fairness to Martin, other tutors also felt that their students held firm opinions on gender when discussing *Paradise Lost*. For instance, in Rose's seminars at a Russell Group university in the Northeast, she recalled there being "some really strongly contested debates about Milton's representation of women in particular". The senior lecturer revelled in this, stating that she found it incredibly "rewarding and exciting" to unpick the prejudices that students often bring to the class.

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<sup>9</sup> 'Mansplaining' is a term used to refer to a man explaining something needlessly, overbearingly, or condescendingly. This is typically when addressing a woman in a manner thought to reveal a patronizing or chauvinistic attitude. See 'Mansplaining', in *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online], < <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/59997929> > [accessed 24 March 2023].

Rose: I'm generalising here and obviously it's not true of all individuals, but there is a sense of – which even amongst students and some of my colleagues as well – they think of Milton as being this establishment figure. They perhaps have some kind of very narrow idea of his very complex attitude to gender. They also have sometimes a very ill informed, not their fault, but it's cultural really, idea of what his politics were and so they tend to assume oh yes, he's this kind of stern, narrow minded puritan. They don't realise the kind of limits of puritanism and the way in which he kind of pushes beyond that stereotype. So, one of the things that I find so rewarding is that when I first see them, I ask them, so what's your sentiment etcetera. It's usually very exciting because usually by the end of the course, their ideas are much more complex. I mean, it doesn't mean that they necessary like him as a man [laughs] or anything like that, but they do have a richer and more nuanced notion of his times and his position in that context as well.

-Excerpt from interview with Rose (2)

At a plate glass university in the Northwest, Raven also recollected students' excitement when discussing gender. Commenting on her final-year module, the senior lecturer believed that this was rooted in students finding conversations on this topic far easier to navigate as opposed to content on literary genre, language, or form. Reflecting that it could occasionally get "heated", Raven shared that it was often difficult to find a balance when trying to channel that enthusiasm to the text:

Raven: What I try though, to do in my seminars, is also to contain. Because one risk when you talk about gender, I'm sure you have that in your classes, is that then they



start going for contemporary debate on women's power which is great, but I always try to contain that enthusiasm and to channel that enthusiasm on the text.

-Excerpt from interview with Raven (2)

Emphasising the distance between our time and Milton's, Helen, a professor at a Russell Group university in the East Midlands, also disclosed how it could be challenging to teach *Paradise Lost* in a seminar setting, and explained how it was a delicate "balancing act":

Helen: [...] as a teacher, you're always trying to find ways to help texts connect with context that your students and you inhabit, you know, we're all reading this in 2020. And I think sometimes as a teacher of earlier literature, it can be valuable as well just to emphasise difference [...] we just have to take seriously that Milton believes that the poem is dictated to him by angels. Now, when we think that, however sceptical we might actually be, I always like to mention that, just to kind of distance the past... it's a bit of a balancing act, you know, you're trying to make it relevant, you're trying to connect, but you also just want to kind of familiarise a little bit as well you know, if that makes sense. I mean that can be quite a challenging thing to do I think in the classroom.

-Excerpt from interview with Helen (1)

Nonetheless, in the case of examining Adam and Eve, by drawing upon students' existing knowledge, Helen explained how classroom discussion on the human pair provided a unique opportunity to consider *Paradise Lost* as an adaptation:

Helen: [...] something that I'm always keen to talk about as a group is what previous knowledge students might have of the story of Adam and Eve. You know, when they learned that, what they think about that, what they think about Milton, essentially rewriting parts of the book of Genesis, you know, just to get them, partly I guess that does double duty in a way, it helps people think about adaptation, you know, about *Paradise Lost* as a kind of, at least in part, to Biblical adaptation. It also gets people thinking about the value of understanding that religious context as a background to understanding the poem.

-Excerpt from interview with Helen (2)

Alongside an appreciation for gender discourse on *Paradise Lost*, interviews with tutors revealed that fascination with character, particularly Satan's, was of peak interest to many of their students. This was most evident in first and second-year undergraduate modules where seminars usually had a heavy focus on dissecting Milton's fallen angel. For instance, when *Paradise Lost* was taught at a plate glass university in the West Midlands to second-year students, Kathy reported that the books they selected substantially revolved around Satan:

Kathy: Book 1 and Book 9. So, as you can imagine, there's a lot of focus on Satan [laughs], a lot of focus on Eve and you know, the Fall and gender roles from that perspective. And I tend to, not always, but there's a bit of a tendency amongst students to focus on the – oh Satan's an antihero, sort of easy interpretations that they're very familiarised with in scholarship. And I do find it a struggle sometimes to get them to complicate that and go beyond those, sort of, easier interpretations. So that's a bit of a challenge.

-Excerpt from interview with Kathy (1)

Kathy realised that her dissatisfaction partially stemmed from the constraints of the module that *Paradise Lost* was being taught on, which meant that ultimately, it became a difficult text to teach:

Kathy: So, you know, it's [the module is] primarily about civil war and revolution and that sort of thing. And because you're trying to connect it to the other texts that they've read – sometimes the module itself can place certain restrictions on how you teach it. And sometimes I think I might want to go down different avenues but the module kind of restricts that a little bit. So sometimes I think do we focus on the most interesting parts? But I think, it's a hard text and different cohorts have different levels of skills and experience and adjusting what you've planned for them can be difficult from that perspective.

-Excerpt from interview with Kathy (2)

Eventually, faculty members at university recognised the need to “prioritise certain other modules”, especially ones that were “more marketable for students”. A limited number of staff at the institution meant that a more “sexy sounding module might be more better than one on the seventeenth century of literature”, stated Kathy. Unsurprisingly, the framing of modules was an important factor when determining how both tutors and students responded to *Paradise Lost*. In Helen's case, the Russell Group East Midland university's second-year module on ‘Renaissance Literature’ comfortably framed discourse on Satan with dramatic contexts in mind:

Eva: What do you think that your students most enjoy discussing?

Helen: That's an excellent question. One of the things that's interesting to me, because a lot of these students that I've been teaching in the second semester Renaissance drama module... and because of a drama module, inevitably, given the medium, so much of our conversation is about character representation and that can be a really interesting way into thinking about certain aspects of *Paradise Lost*, because I know, you know, the majority of the students on the module, they're comfortable in talking about how character gets created, you know. And so, obviously we know that one of the things that Milton is thinking about is writing *Paradise Lost* as a play, as a tragedy rather than an epic, and that can be a good way to get students to think about the implications of that. This is all a very kind of long-winded preamble to say they like to talk about Satan [laughs] and character. Thinking about the sequence through which we go through the book, because Satan is the kind of, in those first two books, our first point of encounter. Literally the first character I suppose that we meet, that I think, is something that students really enjoyed thinking and talking about. They're comfortable talking about character. [...] I think the figure of Satan, the figure of the devil is such a kind of perennial cultural fascination. [...] Everybody's got views on it, and everybody's got analogues that they can bring in as points of comparison. And so that, especially when you're talking about books one and two, tends to be something that students can weigh in with what they think about him.

-Excerpt from interview with Helen (3)

Picking up on this notion that Satan is currently a figure of cultural fascination, Cora, who taught at a post-1992 university in the Northwest, provided insight on how discussions on Satan operated in her first-year undergraduate seminars:

Cora: We think a fair bit about language, who is speaking, how they are speaking? I get them to think about the construction of Satan as a character. One of the kind of key thoughts about Satan is that even if you haven't read *Paradise Lost*, its influence and Western culture's depiction of Satan feeds through to all sorts of other forms of popular culture. And so I get them to think about Blake's notion of Milton being of the devil's party without knowing it and how much Milton's Satan, by the use of words, whether this is you know, beguiling in terms of his ability to persuade, or whether particularly in pandemonium, he just comes across as a selfish whiny git who is out for himself. And so getting them to think carefully about the kind of politician's words which should be presented by Satan and also the power of language to persuade, even when it's against your better interest, so that they can hopefully be more careful and cautious in terms of when they're hearing, you know, public speakers, and I guess the essence of the power of words.

-Excerpt from interview with Cora (1)

Using Satan as a model for how to analyse language in both poetic and modern contexts, Cora encouraged her students to engage in debates during seminars. Through her use of frequent open-ended questions and a "position statement", the tutor divided the students into groups, and tasked them to come up with arguments for and against the notion. In essence, this "loosely" recreated the practices of the renaissance classroom and propelled students to strengthen their argument and refer to close readings as evidence. Usually, this practice was

favoured and received well in class. However, it was interesting to discover that after four years of delivering the ‘World, Time, and Text’ module containing *Paradise Lost*, she was now keen to rest teaching it. Candidly, Cora revealed that this year, her first-year undergraduate group “really absolutely loathed everything on *Paradise Lost*”, leaving her with an impression that they did not enjoy anything. This led Cora to conclude that it had not been the most successful term. The senior lecturer felt strongly that they had “tried to do too much” on the course, and stressed that *Paradise Lost* needed its own module, or required relocation to a later year group in order to do everything that they had hoped for. Despite feeling this way and communicating it during the programme review at her institution, Cora stated that her colleagues were keen for it to remain in the first-year module as they thought it important to introduce students to “something really difficult and hard and hit them with it”. This was great in theory, thought Cora, but in practice, she knew it would be wise to get students more familiar and comfortable with language before tackling something so difficult.

Commenting on the changes she observed in students throughout her teaching career, Cora stated:

Cora: With *Paradise Lost*, I think it's increasingly the kind of expectations that I could have when I first started teaching, I can't have any more. When I first started teaching, there was always someone in the class who was a bit of a classics nut and had read everything that Homer had ever written. Usually they were boys actually. When I first started teaching, I could usually guarantee that somebody in the classroom would have a hook into classical literature, and someone else would know their Bible. [...] I could guarantee that somebody in the classroom would have the answers, but increasingly I find that students don't have any knowledge of the classics or any knowledge of the narrative.

Eva: Why do you think that is?

Cora: I think it's partly education, but also, I guess, that they're not as prevailing in popular culture.

-Excerpt from interview with Cora (2)

Though other tutors did recognise this change of appetite in students and their varying levels of school education, Cora was alone in interpreting it as something negative. Contextually in secular modern society, she explained that there was an “anxiety of religion” where people assumed that any kind of association with a religious belief or faith was somehow morally suspect. In effect, she believed that general fascination on topics such as the Christian concept of the Fall, which is at the heart of *Paradise Lost*, has declined, and therefore, so too has the quality of conversation in her classroom discourse. Cora also stressed that the COVID-19 global pandemic had a major impact on the education sector, leading to a further disconnect in students:

Cora: To be honest, I think it is because they've had both their A levels disrupted by [the] pandemic and yeah, and the fact that we're now going to have people coming in who have had their GCSEs as well as their A-Levels disrupted. We're going to live with the aftershocks for a few years I think. I've never had so much anxiety in that assessment as I'm dealing with this year from students and I think it's because of the aftershocks of the pandemic and I guess losing the confidence in having your A-levels in person.

-Excerpt from interview with Cora (3)

As mentioned by Cora, the pandemic had a cataclysmic effect on students and their learning. In a report on the impact of COVID-19 and higher education, Peter Finn and Radu Cinpoes highlight that exacerbated pressure on students included loss of learning time and curtailments of academic support, as well as mental health and wellbeing impacts, to name a few. The controversy surrounding the awarding of final grades at GCSE and A-levels ultimately led students from BAME backgrounds and those studying in more deprived areas being disadvantaged, while the system ‘was heavily skewed in favour of private, grammar, and selective schools’.<sup>10</sup> A House of Commons Committee report reiterated this, and stated:

What we see is that the north and the Midlands are doing worse than the south and disadvantaged pupils are doing worse than non-disadvantaged pupils, but very notably all pupils in more disadvantaged areas have a high likelihood of suffering severe learning loss. It is not only poor children; it is non-poor children in disadvantaged areas.<sup>11</sup>

As a result, many of those entering university in the affected years experienced heightened levels of anxiety.<sup>12</sup> In light of considering what this did to studies on Milton more specifically, as Cora noticed, first-year undergraduate students who fell victim to unequal systems were massively overwhelmed by the course requirements which led to an overall negative learning experience. Across all institutions, the shift to the online environment was a

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<sup>10</sup> The London School of Economics and Political Science, *The impact of COVID-19 on A-Levels since 2020, and what it means for higher education in 2022/23* (2022) <<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/impact-of-covid19-on-a-levels/>> [accessed 2 January 2023].

<sup>11</sup> House of Commons Education Committee, *Is the Catch-up Programme fit for purpose?* (2022) <<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/9251/documents/160043/default/>> [accessed 2 January 2023].

<sup>12</sup> Jacks Bennett, Jon Heron, David Gunnell, Sarah Purdy, and Myles-Jay Linton, 'The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student mental health and wellbeing in UK university students: a multiyear cross-sectional analysis', *Journal of Mental Health*, 31.4, (2022), 597–604.



major challenge and tutors including Kathy reported lower levels of engagement in online seminars:

Kathy: [...] when it came to the online seminars, the attendance was quite poor. [...] The engagement online was nowhere near as high as it would have been in person. There were some who I was very grateful for, students who put their cameras on, but very few did. And by the time we'd gotten to *Paradise Lost*, I'd given them worksheets in advance with questions we were gonna discuss because I found that quite helpful. You can't be quite as spontaneous I think online, as you were in person, so I'd structured these worksheets and told them which kind of speeches we were gonna look at, whereas usually, I like being a little bit more spontaneous. And that did help to an extent, but yeah, it was still a bit of a struggle. But I wouldn't say the experience of teaching *Paradise Lost* was different to teaching any other text on that module that they found difficult. The engagement was very similar.

-Excerpt from interview with Kathy (3)

Though the university changed their format in teaching and eased the timetable by spacing the workload, Kathy stressed that success in her *Paradise Lost* seminars was largely contingent on whether the students had done the required reading. In her experience of teaching Milton online, she was not confident that students had prepared and felt that they "needed to start from scratch". Unable to see most members of her class, she found it increasingly difficult to tell, especially in instances where no one engaged in conversation. As this study has highlighted, the educational contexts of readers are a crucial factor that have a significant impact on reading experiences. This has been evident through the cases of numerous participants who shared that knowledge on how their intersectional formations

coloured their interpretations were borne from cross-cultural and interfaith dialogue in their seminars. Ultimately, lower levels of engagement from students during the pandemic means that readers would be far less likely to connect with the poem on a deeper, personal level; and if they did, the chances of these interpretations being shared in an online seminar context would be slim.

During our interview in March 2022, I asked Martin about his experience of teaching Milton online:

Eva: Do you think that engagement has been any different since teaching online? Are you doing in-person teaching right now or? For the last two years you must have switched.

Martin: Yeah, we've gone back to teaching in the classroom and students definitely found it harder to concentrate when it was all online. I was a terrible teacher online, quite frankly. Most students were not showing their faces and I think it just means you can't read the room at all and it wasn't great pedagogically. [...] You know, it makes you aware of how much you're looking at how students are talking to each other, and things like that. You know, it made me really aware of how it was a social activity, and you need your social skills.

-Excerpt from interview with Martin (4)

This illustrates the many variables that may influence a reader's learning journey, including the environment that they are in, and highlights the multiple benefits of in-person classroom interactions with peers and tutors. Despite this view, introverted members of a group who did not enjoy social activities may see this as a positive. Empathising with the struggle of

students, Martin explained that he tries to ease the burden for students by crafting lessons that require minimal preparation:

Martin: I think students have a lot of demand on their time, I think some kind of do their best, they might read half of that. It's very rarely that I'm totally convinced that someone hasn't read any of it. Even so, especially after the last few years where I'm very aware of the fact that the students' circumstances are pretty crazy at the moment a lot of the time, and have been, so, I try to teach almost so that if you did not read the text, you could still get quite a lot from the session. So I tend to put chunks of the poem on the board and say, well, you know, let's use this as a jumping off point. Feel free to bring in your reading from kind of around those books that we've been talking about. So I might just say, let's just read together this little chunk of the poem, and sometimes I do break out groups where I say talk for a few minutes because they're quite big groups. Then we compare notes, and I can try and build in slightly more branching ideas from that.

-Excerpt from interview with Martin (5)

This approach was appreciated by Martin's students, and regularly led to fruitful discussions.

At the Russell Group university in the East Midlands, Helen was very conscious that reading *Paradise Lost* is often associated with difficulty. When enquiring on how students were supported at her institution, she pointed to how the module was structured:

Helen: [...] lectures do a lot of that contextual work. And hopefully that's one way of helping them with access to the poem. Increasingly, and I think this is going to be more of a kind of rich resource given the challenges of the last few months, we so we

use the virtual learning environment, we use Blackboard. And we make sure that we put a lot of curated online material to support students learning.

-Excerpt from interview with Helen (4)

Though COVID-19 did have an undeniably drastic impact on teaching and learning, to this day, tutors continue to embrace effective online tools, which work to enhance the overall learning experience. It was pleasing to see that numerous tutors were readily engaging in new, innovative modes of learning and assessment. In particular, on the third year 'Reading *Paradise Lost*' module at the Russell Group university in London, students were assigned with a close reading exercise, an editing exercise, and a poetic imitation. Savannah explained that she wished for the assessment module to be diverse, which came from her personal belief that it was one way in which they could diversify the curriculum:

Savannah: [...] the particular close reading exercise I set them asks them to take some of the contextual concerns of the poem we'd just been talking about, and bringing that into the close reading. So even when I'm getting them to do close reading, it's to try and illuminate those key concepts and ideas. I wanted the assessment for the module to be diverse, and that comes from a personal belief that one of the ways in which we can diversify the curriculum is to give lots of different types of voices to give the chance to shine and show their best side. For different students from different educational backgrounds, from different religious backgrounds, and all kinds of different backgrounds, they will all have different talents and will be able to show them in different settings. So from the beginning I wanted the assessment for the module not just to be an essay, although there is an essay! [laughs] I also wanted to give assessment and feedback opportunities throughout the module, and not just the

end. Partly because people who have been to certain types of schools are not necessarily always as confident – but all our students need confidence to build them up. So yeah, we do a close reading exercise in the beginning of the module, we then do an editing task [...] There's a choice of three different passages from the poem in its first printing and they have to modernise the spelling and punctuation, and they also have to gloss any words they don't know- and that's quite a useful levelling exercise in getting everybody thinking themselves into the language of the poem. So we do that. And finally, I didn't want students to have this sense of Milton as this kind of monolithic genius peering down on them [laughs] we do a bit of work deconstructing Harold Bloom around that idea. I wanted them to feel like they could speak with Milton as equals. [...] We have this exercise where we try and speak in Milton's voice and what I do is [laughs] I get students to pick a sentence from *Paradise Lost*, and then to pick a sentence from another poem. Obviously, a sentence can vary from 50 lines to 3 or even 1. And then to try and write the other poem into the *Paradise Lost* voice.

-Excerpt from interview with Savannah (3)

The senior lecturer explained that the imitation exercise worked wonderfully as students were inspired to get incredibly creative and gave brilliant responses. She recalled there being one member of the group who took Mr. Strong from the *Mr. Men* books and imitated that into the Miltonic language, whilst another used lyrics from a Beyoncé song. For Savannah, confidence building was key in helping students enrapture themselves into the world of the poem. As a result, in this particular classroom a complicated literary work was made more accessible for modern-day readers.

Freedom to do exercises of these sorts was made possible by the fact that *Paradise Lost* was given its own module in third year, allowing module convenors time to trial new methods, material, and content over a whole semester. At the Russell Group university in the West Midlands, Jeremy was motivated in making his Milton module memorable for final-year students through extra-curricular activities. This included taking several cohorts, including my own, to Milton's Cottage at Chalfont St Giles. Jeremy and I joyfully recalled how it helped the class bond and feel closer to both Milton and *Paradise Lost*:

Jeremy: It was the place in Chalfont St Giles where he finished *Paradise Lost* in the 1660s. And- there's not a massive amount to see there, I mean, it's a small cottage with three or four rooms-

Eva: Ah it's so magical, we all loved it!

Jeremy: It's the trip, it's two hours there on the bus and we bond, and we have a quiz for fun [laughing]. We go into the Garden, and then we go down to the Church and it's a kind of country village really. Chalfont St Giles is a WORLD away from [redacted name of city]. We encounter the people there and they've got their own sort of style and person.

Eva: And you feel closer to the text! It's strange after that trip. I think we all felt it in our seminars. Like you said, it's a great bonding exercise and it really helps build a good dynamic for the classes.

Jeremy: And you get a bit more of a feel for Milton himself, and that's important!

-Excerpt from interview with Jeremy (4)

Alongside closing the physical space between students and Milton, Jeremy also encouraged them to read the words of the poem aloud. Each year the module ran, he organised a broadcast of ten students reading *Paradise Lost* on Burn FM Radio Station. Ten extracts were linked together by a short narrative over a 30-minute duration.

Jeremy: We went out at 7pm on a Tuesday evening to, I always like to say the waiting millions, but it's probably around 7 people and their ready meal, you know [both laughing]. But it was wonderful to be with the students in the studio. There's a feeling of group euphoria afterwards, it was great.

-Excerpt from interview with Jeremy (5)

Group euphoria was also felt during 'The Milton Marathon' where over a span of 12 hours, the poem in its entirety was read dramatically to an audience. Student participants reported feeling far more engaged with the poem as a result.

Jeremy: I just love the idea that people will inhabit the poem more than they might have thought they would do. It's a group exercise and everybody kind of drops their inhibitions a bit and by the end, they're all so exhausted there's no inhibitors left AT ALL [both laughing]. It mingles staff and students, breaks down those barriers, which is great. Teaching and the university experience should be this partnership, shouldn't it? We're all in this together and we're all learning from each other. And the day I stop learning from students and teaching, I've just got to go and do something else because it won't be interesting! [laughs]

-Excerpt from interview with Jeremy (6)

Raven also practised something similar with her third years. Though her ‘Rebels, Villains and Discontented Minds’ module only looked at *Paradise Lost* for three weeks, she emphasised the importance of hearing the words of the epic aloud and made an active effort to organise a reading marathon for her students:

Raven: I love the dramatic nature of the text itself to the point that every year we arranged for a reading marathon of Milton, and we have characters. So, and that I think is one of the most beautiful parts of the text, this is something that also students tend to enjoy, is the idea that you can really listen to the character as if they are on stage [...] and I guess that that has to do somehow with the fact that initially it was meant to be a tragedy so that dramatic nature of the text remains as a significant part of the epic. And then I like the perspectives ... this idea that obviously it is being discussed so many times and for so long... this idea that you really can empathise with each character in a particular way and that is somehow a trap that you've come to realise why you are reading it, but it is beautiful. It is really powerful to me. [...] this is what also students tend to enjoy, you know, the idea that they can side with Satan and with Eve and with Adam, and at the same time feel guilty because of that sort of shared intimacy with these characters. So to me, it's really the dramatic nature of the text that makes it so powerful. Yeah, and it's of the reasons why I chose this epic poem in a module which is actually looking at drama.

-Excerpt from interview with Raven (3)



Raven's account serves as a brilliant example of how Milton's work can be moulded to fit many themes. While anticipating students' struggle in attempting to decode difficult aspects of *Paradise Lost*, she also regularly recommended audiobooks and online resources to help them overcome problems with language and syntax.

Elsewhere, while teaching second-year students at the Russell Group East Midland university, Vivian tasked students with drawing activities to help them visualise what was happening:

Vivian: When we're looking at Books 1 and 2, obviously, we're talking about Satan as a character. I get them to do an exercise to do with visualising hell and visualising Satan - what they look like. So I get different groups to work, one on the description of Satan himself; one on Sin and Death; one on maybe the devils and pandemonium all that kind of stuff. [...] I actually get them to draw pictures, and then label them. Because one of the things they realise is, they're these amazingly vivid glimpses, but then actually when you try and draw it... you get these kinds of, you know, strange and unearthly things, especially you know with Sin and Death and the bits down from the waist... that Milton is very physically specific.

-Excerpt from interview with Vivian (3)

Researchers have found that preferred learning styles vary for everyone and while some individuals respond best to reading material, others find more success through visual or auditory modes of comprehension.<sup>13</sup> With tutors making use of these various practices in

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<sup>13</sup> For more information, see Patrycja Marta Kamińska, *Learning Styles and Second Language Education*, 1st edn (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014) and Uros Ocepek, Zoran Bosnic, Irena Nancovska Serbec, Joze Rugelj, 'Exploring the relation between learning style models and preferred multimedia types', *Computers and Education*, 69.1, (2013), 343-355.

seminars, we see that they were accommodating for different types of learners in order to help each new cohort of students appreciate Milton's work.

Whilst some educators were fortunate to have the license to be more innovative, the most common complaint from other tutors was that there was not enough time to teach the poem on modules where it was not the sole focus. Stating that it was difficult to do it in three weeks, Raven was among tutors who were aware that the poem needed more time or better yet, a course of its own. Despite this, Raven shared her concern in not knowing how successful it would be to have "a module on one author and one text for 20-year-old students". The appeal of *Paradise Lost* for undergraduates was under constant review and led some institutions including the plate glass universities in the West Midlands and East Midlands to stop teaching it.

During the 'Black Lives Matter' movement, calls to 'decolonise the curriculum' were amplified and departments across the nation were having conversations on curriculum reform. In the latter segment of all interviews, though I asked all tutors specific questions on whether they were familiar with 'decolonise the curriculum' initiatives and what it meant to them, it was fascinating to observe that for many, related comments were scattered throughout our conversations. On one hand, this could indicate that tutors were already considering these aspects, or alternatively, this could have been due to early access to the questions ahead of the interview. It is also quite possible, given they were being interviewed by a hijab-wearing woman of colour, that social desirability bias may have affected responses.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, it was indeed interesting to observe how considerations were made being made on modular, departmental, and wider university levels.

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<sup>14</sup> See 'Part 1: Methods' for insight on how social desirability bias may have affected the study.

Kathy: I think they're taking it very seriously at [plate glass university in the West Midlands], which is great because we've overhauled quite a few of our modules with that in mind. So our core modules now at 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year have all been... recalibrated is the wrong word... but we really looked at the selection of writers and tried to make them less focussed on white European experience really.

Eva: What does it mean to you?

Kathy: Well I think we should be moving away from a white curriculum because that can reproduce all sorts of power structures that aren't desirable. And also to have a white curriculum doesn't represent our student body either. It certainly doesn't at [plate glass university in the West Midlands] anyway. It might've done where I used to teach (...) but not at [plate glass university in the West Midlands]. I think it's important to reflect the interest of our students as well as thinking about how the white curriculum looks and the kinds of power structures it might continue to uphold.

-Excerpt from interview with Kathy (4)

The decolonising agenda was one factor that led the plate glass university in the West Midlands to discontinue teaching a module containing Milton's epic and other European seventeenth-century literature. Though *Paradise Lost* was still being taught in places like the Russell Group institution in the West Midlands, the notion of white privilege was something at the forefront of some tutors' minds. This was the case with Vivan. When asked if she would recommend the poem to be read by people from BAME backgrounds, she was hesitant to reply. The associate professor had a deep sense of self-awareness and pointed to her own privilege as a "white woman", stating that it was a major problem across the academy for

someone of her background to presume what a BAME student may or may not enjoy. She added that conversations were being had at her institution on how to decolonise the curriculum effectively and make it more inclusive by speaking to different people's experiences. The drive to do so was magnified after nationwide protests where a statue of slave-trader Edward Colston was toppled on June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020.<sup>15</sup> Reflecting shortly after this incident during the midst of the Black Lives Matter movement, Martin shared how it was a turning point for people in his institution:

Martin: [...] we had a really interesting few years (...) I think the university has been a really interesting place to be over the last few years in terms of how the university has had to address its relationship with colonialism in a way that it hasn't really done so before [...] we just couldn't not talk about it anymore. We couldn't not address it.

-Excerpt from interview with Martin (6)

Martin stressed that on a personal level, pedagogically this meant looking at the way the subject of literature was being taught and analysing “the relationship between cultural privilege and the teaching of English Literature”. The “decentring of whiteness” was a task that he believed lay ahead in teaching practices. The senior lecturer was optimistic about the future, and mentioned how teaching Milton to third-year students in small groups would be “perfect”. When asked if he would recommend the poem to be read by BAME students, he eagerly replied yes, and envisioned a potential special topic on Milton, *Paradise Lost*, and race.

Eva: Would you encourage students from BAME backgrounds to study the poem?

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<sup>15</sup> BBC News, 'Edward Colston statue: Protesters tear down slave trader monument', *BBC News*, 8 June 2020.

Martin: Um... YEAH! Absolutely! [laughs] I think I've been thinking about – again anticipating some of your later questions a little bit about what could a kind of decolonised teaching of *Paradise Lost* look like, and I suppose my answer would be yes, but we could probably do better in terms of decolonising the way we teach it. So, in a way I think I'd really love to teach a special topic on Milton which would include weeks thinking about the poem and race for example. That's not something I've thought about in exactly those terms, but there's loads you could do with that. Especially with a bit more time and more advanced students where you're not spending so much time doing the layout of the whole poem, and getting through the difficult language and stuff. Like his connection with Roger Williams and the language of the Americas, trying to open up that kind of set of connections with indigenous studies for example, that could be a really interesting way of slightly decentring the poem, but teaching it in relation to that.

-Excerpt from interview with Martin (7)

I wholeheartedly wished him well. For existing courses exploring *Paradise Lost*, teachers of Milton also recalled continuous efforts to diversify their reading lists to include women, and people of colour. Tutors including Rose were also optimistic and illustrated how Milton was no longer “narrowly English”, but now a global figure which was an interesting aspect of Milton studies. Rose referred to the wide range of reception studies that reflect the profound impact the author has had on people worldwide, and shared her excitement in “people finding all manner of ways of connecting with him”. She warned, however, that it was important to think holistically about how to integrate this into study effectively, and not just insert it onto the end of lecture slides as a form of tokenism. Meaningful action was necessary, and her

north-eastern university's practice of hiring three "decolonising interns" per year was praised as she found it highly beneficial to hear from BAME students themselves on how educators could better their practices.

In conclusion, an individual's learning environment has a powerful impact on how they encounter literature. In order to continue to teach Milton in a decolonised world, a version of inclusivity must be practised where students are not just welcomed, but are seen for who they are and asked to join the conversation. As university level teaching of Milton is slowly declining, with more and more modules containing early modern texts and *Paradise Lost* being discontinued each year, it is imperative that institutions remain steadfast in their intention to develop and widen outreach. As this study has shown, there is much potential to appeal to students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. Evidence suggests that engagement with the poem is heightened among Muslimah students as they often used their religious frameworks to colour their interpretations. Muslimah students appear not to be deterred by a narrative poem based on a Christian origin story, but rather, interfaith dialogue helps to facilitate conversations. This study has discovered that when tutors create enabling environments where students perceive their identities as strengths, cross-cultural and intersectional conversations flourish and the whole group benefits. This is also the case when Muslimah students naturally connect with other early modern works of a religious nature. Perceiving learning as a collaborative effort, some tutors make notable efforts to bridge the gap between Milton and his modern readers. Collective student enthusiasm about the poem's gender politics and Satan were consistently evident and were particularly useful points of entry on modules where *Paradise Lost* was not the sole focus. Where *Paradise Lost* was given more time, tutors shared innovative ways by which they made students engage with the poem despite its difficulty. Finally, the repercussions of COVID-19 on the education sector

have meant that now more than ever, students are in urgent need of tutors who will support them in the learning process.

## Conclusion

When exploring the reception of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, this thesis has shown that there is much to gain when we consider the responses of minority and non-traditional readers. This investigation was inspired by influential works such as Islam Issa's reception study, which looked at Egyptian Sunni Muslim readers who encountered the epic in Arabic translation.<sup>1</sup> Taking the conversation in a different direction, my own study gave voice to Muslimah readers who understood the poem in its original English form. By doing so, it highlighted the richness of Milton's appeal by demonstrating that one does not always have to look too far to understand the global impact of *Paradise Lost*. Focussing on a target group of British South-Asian Muslim women of Bangladeshi, Indian, and Pakistani descent, my investigation began with a hypothesis that the individual backgrounds of readers would colour their readings of the poem. The study found that readers did not leave their intersectional identities at the door, but rather, they brought it *with* them to the reading event. In turn, this had a significant impact on their reading experiences. This was identifiable through a novel exploration of readerprints which looked to the way in which a reader's interpretative response was influenced by facets of their intersectional identity. Using this framework, the study found that for both Muslimah and non-Muslim participants, intersectional identities shaped their critical faculties and were frequently used to enhance their understandings of the poem. However, as well as the backgrounds of readers informing their viewpoints, something more complex and interesting was uncovered. Other factors such the personality of participants and the social dynamics of their learning environments also heavily influenced their readings. Alongside this, the moments of interaction between myself and the respondents when data was collected affected interpretations. It was through an exploration of these variables that we

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<sup>1</sup> Islam Issa, *Milton in the Arab Muslim World* (New York: Routledge, 2017).



understood how introspection was inspired in the minds of modern readers, characters were presented in fascinating lights, and interfaith and cross-cultural conversations were produced in diverse learning environments.

As this study has revealed, the religious formations of the target group greatly contributed to how they approached characters in *Paradise Lost*. Muslimah readers were mindful that Milton's epic shared similarities with the Qur'anic story of creation, leading them to compare both narratives and use their religious frameworks to colour their readerprints. For instance, while God the Father was heavily critiqued by non-Muslim participants who detected distance, detachment, and dullness in the figure; Muslimah respondents reconciled these observations by comparing Milton's God with understandings of God in the Islamic tradition. This resulted in them expressing a quieter discomfort, a lighter critique, and attempts to rationalise his behaviour. An example of this was when Islamic creed on God being a transcendent figure was projected by a Muslimah onto her reading which explained God the Father's cold and distant depiction in the poem. By contrast, feelings of discomfort were more pronounced in their analyses of God the Son who does not exist in the Islamic tradition. To reconcile the Son's presence in the poem, Muslimahs adapted their interpretations in consideration of their religious beliefs which resulted in the figure's acceptance, or rejection on the grounds of irrelevance, discomfort, and a lack of interest. Reading through the Islamic lens of Shaythaan/Iblis helped Muslimahs understand Milton's Satan and resist his charms. It was fascinating to observe three different strands of thinking in their responses on Satan. In the first, Muslimahs were somewhat troubled by Milton's depiction as it gave rise to feelings of discomfort and risked creating momentary anxieties in their religious beliefs. As a result, these readers did not appreciate Milton's attempt to induce sympathy for the devil. In the second, Muslimahs reported to be impressed by Milton's portrayal of the fallen figure but stated that they were not fooled. A

valuable distinction was made here between sympathising and appreciating Satan as it allowed some Muslimah readers to add another dimension to their Islamic understandings of Satan's arrogance. Third, there were those who remained unimpressed and dismissed the creature as illogical after comparing Satan's story with the Islamic scripture and tradition.

British South-Asian Muslimahs brought an Islamic perspective to their reading of the human figures in the poem too. Associations made with the prophet Adam in Islam meant that a number of these readers looked upon Milton's Adam in a softer and compassionate light in contrast to their non-Muslim counterparts. However, when Muslimah readers were dissatisfied with Adam's portrayal in the epic, it was because they believed it fell short of their religious understandings of the first man. Most compellingly, Muslim women were united in expressing their deep dissatisfaction on Milton's Eve and believed it to be a false representation of the first woman presented in the Qur'anic tradition. Such hypercritical reactions were not only about religion. The readers' gender identities also played a vital part in their responses. In a cultural climate where women's positions in Islam are publicly speculated upon, these female respondents' efforts to take control and reclaim the narrative by explaining the significance of a figure who is revered and not blamed in Islam was understandable. While non-Muslim female readers were overall more comfortable with the portrayal of Eve and objected to displays of misogyny and patriarchy in the poem, Muslimahs went a step further and took the opportunity to explain their understandings on Islam's status on women. These views were often openly shared in their learning environments and were typically in response to their peers' perspectives. What emerges from this study, then, is that the social dynamics of reading are constantly in play with the identities of readers as a group and as individuals. Muslimahs' interpretative words of protest on Milton's Eve can thus be recognised as subtle attempts to dismantle negative and sexist stereotypes on Muslim women and reshape the socio-cultural norms of the times we live in. This speaks to how *Paradise*

*Lost* has relevance for readers of different faiths and backgrounds and affirms its ability to teach us more about ourselves, each other, and the struggles we face in our world.

Another vital aspect that shaped readerprints was the personality of participants. I had not considered this before conducting the study. However, after noting the differences between participants in interviews, I felt it necessary to appreciate these nuances. My loose definitions of certain personality types allowed me to consider how Muslimahs approached the literary work and reflect on how their personalities may have contributed to their readerprints. While my categories did not define a participant, they allowed further insight into how they correlated with certain ways of reading the epic. For instance, Muslimah respondents who I perceived as objectivist readers actively aimed to disregard their cultural backgrounds whilst reading. Though this was their chosen interpretative method, it was interesting to observe that it was not always possible to achieve this standard. In many of these cases, the intersectional identities of respondents still found a way to inform their readings. Nonetheless, their attempts to approach the poem in this manner aligned with the wider view of some critics who play down the significance of a reader's intellectual and cultural formation, and instead emphasise the reader's training and ability to read the text on its own terms. Centre stage is thus given to the importance of understanding the epic in its historical, cultural moment of production and first reception. Therefore, even if these respondents were to find that their backgrounds *had* coloured their thought processes, they deemed it to be irrelevant to their readings.

Conversely, cultural accommodators had a different attitude and typically read the poem through the lens of their own cultural orientation and beliefs. Through this approach, there was a general recognition of differences between participants' personal stances on the poem and the English Christian culture in which the poem was originally produced. As a result, the differing frameworks were used to create new meaning which allowed both

structures to coexist. This contrasted to the contrarian personality type which was assigned to a Muslimah participant who presented herself as having contrary and opposing views to others when reading the poem. The surroundings of this participant largely determined how she responded to questions and further stressed the power of social dynamics and the profound impact this can have on the reading experience. It also captured the difficulties in conducting a study of this nature which presented a certain social dynamic that I suspect greatly affected findings. Though this challenge was present in all cases to some degree, the value of distinguishing between respondents and their distinct personalities was helpful in this regard as it aided in unpacking their contributions and reviewing their overall thought processes to approaching literary works.

Lastly, the conformist category was given to a Muslimah reader whose interpretation of the epic was heavily and continually influenced by her own Islamic identification which prompted the poem to be read in this light. This orthodox Muslim reader was resolute in analysing *Paradise Lost* through this approach and directly contrasted the practice of participants who I deemed objectivists. Nevertheless, it was fascinating to observe how despite the four distinct personality types, the cultural and religious formations of these Muslimah participants remarkably coloured their readings to some degree and produced intriguing insights on the poem. Whether this occurred knowingly or unknowingly for readers, it emphasised the poem's power to induce responses that interacted with their unique intersectional identities. This may be attributed to the theological nature of the epic, which speaks profoundly to Muslim readers through its shared scriptural context with the Islamic tradition. Yet, we also saw countless examples of how the socio, cultural, and religious formations of non-Muslim participants informed their readerprints in exceptional ways too. This does not come as a surprise. I am reminded of my own exposure to the epic in seminars

and remember students of all faiths and backgrounds engaging with the poem on a deeply introspective level. However, this did not occur in every seminar that explored different texts. So, what is it about this distant seventeenth century text that inspires this type of reaction? Perhaps it is the world that Milton creates, the characters he dares to bring to life, or the questions that prod us long after we close the book. Or perhaps there is not anything truly intrinsic about Milton's poem, and such insight is a result of good conditions that produce fruitful conversations. I believe that given the right kind of learning environment and an approach that enables and values the minds of all those in our classrooms, a similar response can be produced on an entirely different author or text. At a time where study on Milton's epic is declining and higher educational institutions in the UK are continually thinking of new ways to connect with students, I propose that we take readerprints as a way to acknowledge and appreciate readers from all backgrounds. The key to creating meaningful connection with others is in giving them license to exist in our creative spaces and sincerely valuing their input. I am aware that taken to an extreme, this can be applied in an unproductive way. However, this study has illustrated that there can be a middle ground, where both the text and reader can be welcomed at the reading event. If we wish Muslimah students to be more engaged with literature, we can learn from this work and use it to embrace English literature's capability in bridging and diagnosing cultural difference. This study has developed an approach that understands that the individual reader is always in a social environment. My method to capture that through questionnaires and interviews is something that departs from existing models of looking at readership. The material that I have collected and the methodology that I have employed can improve the outcomes of this non-traditional group and help them feel more appreciated in our classrooms when exploring Milton's poem, but also more widely in the discipline. Universities are, after all, the perfect place to embrace differences and cultivate conversation. As we saw through the tutor responses, there are

numerous benefits of inter-faith and cross-cultural dialogue as it increases engagement on the epic and helps to facilitate conversation. By valuing readerprints, therefore, we will be ever closer to our hope of creating an equal playing field where we can share knowledge and there is room for all to flourish.

In future, there is potential to expand this study to explore an alternate group of readers on *Paradise Lost* or entirely different literary work. For example, if we are to consider British South-Asian Muslim women more specifically, it would be intriguing to uncover their readerprints on texts that directly depict their religious and cultural communities. Additionally, as well as the subject nature of texts, we know that the world in which we encounter literary works can have an immense impact on how we produce meaning. To understand this impact, there may be ways to capture responses in a classroom while they are happening. This would be instrumental in giving us real time information on how best to approach students' learning and improve our practices. Furthermore, as we move forward and face an increasingly technological world, it is worth pondering what happens when online platforms become the mediator between the person and text and how this affects a reader's responses. More urgently perhaps, the growing popularity of artificial intelligence has meant that online content is easily accessible and answers to any question can be generated within seconds. In the study of Milton's epic and the arts more generally, this has made human connection more potent. It is therefore imperative that we become more innovative and look at ways we can bring the focus back to readers. One way to achieve this is through an appreciation of individual readerprints. This emphasis will allow readers to see the value in themselves and their thought processes and motivate them to reflect authentically from within. As well as enabling readers to grow in confidence, it will aid in creating a stimulating environment where we are all participating in an interpretative quest to understand how and why we think in the ways that we do. This will help in bridging and

diagnosing cultural difference in the classroom. As this study has demonstrated, the magic of Milton's epic is that it travels through the ages and leaves an imprint on readers in fantastically diverse ways. If we embrace this fact and acknowledge how this does not diminish but enhances our understanding of the text, we can be sure of Milton's future in our classrooms.

## List of Appendices

Appendix A: Ethical Approval

Appendix B: Participant Information Guide and Data Protection Notice

Appendix C: Consent Form

Appendix D: Preliminary Questionnaire for Tutors - SurveyMonkey

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Appendix F: Interview Agenda for Readers

Appendix G: Interview Agenda for Tutors



## Appendix A: Ethical Approval

<b>UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL REVIEW</b>
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### Why we should use this form:

This form is to be completed by PIs or supervisors (for PGR student research) who have completed the University of Birmingham's Ethical Review of Research Self Assessment Form (SAF) and have decided that further ethical review and approval is required before the commencement of a given Research Project.

**Please be aware that all new research projects undertaken by postgraduate research (PGR) students first registered as from 1st September 2008 will be subject to the University's Ethical Review Process. PGR students first registered before 1<sup>st</sup> September 2008 should refer to their Department/School/College for further advice.**

### Researchers in the following categories are to use this form:

1. The project is to be conducted by:
  - staff of the University of Birmingham; or
  - postgraduate research (PGR) students enrolled at the University of Birmingham (to be completed by the student's supervisor);
2. The project is to be conducted at the University of Birmingham by visiting researchers.

**Students undertaking undergraduate projects and taught postgraduate (PGT) students should refer to their Department/School for advice.**

### NOTES:

- An electronic version of the completed form should be submitted to the Research Ethics Officer, at the following email address: [aer-ethics@contacts.bham.ac.uk](mailto:aer-ethics@contacts.bham.ac.uk). Please **do not** submit paper copies.
- If, in any section, you find that you have insufficient space, or you wish to supply additional material not specifically requested by the form, please it in a separate file, clearly marked and attached to the submission email.
- If you have any queries about the form, please address them to the Research Ethics Team.



**Before submitting, please tick this box to confirm that you have consulted and understood the following information and guidance and that you have taken it into account when completing your application:**

- **The information and guidance provided on the University's ethics webpages**

<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/finance/accounting/Research-Support-Group/Research-Ethics/Ethical-Review-of-Research.aspx>

- The University's Code of Practice for Research  
([http://www.as.bham.ac.uk/legislation/docs/COP\\_Research.pdf](http://www.as.bham.ac.uk/legislation/docs/COP_Research.pdf))

<b>UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL REVIEW</b>	<i>OFFICE USE ONLY:</i> Application No: Date Received:
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### 1. TITLE OF PROJECT

Milton and the Modern Muslimah: *Paradise Lost* and British-Asian Muslim Women

### 2. THIS PROJECT IS:

- University of Birmingham Staff Research project
- University of Birmingham Postgraduate Research (PGR) Student project
- Other  (Please specify):

### 3. INVESTIGATORS

#### a) PLEASE GIVE DETAILS OF THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS OR SUPERVISORS (FOR PGR STUDENT PROJECTS)

Name: <small>title / first name / family name</small>	Dr Hugh Adlington
Highest qualification & position held:	(PhD) Senior Lecturer in English Literature
School/Department	EDACS/English Literature
Telephone:	[REDACTED]
Email address:	[REDACTED]

Name: <small>title / first name / family name</small>	Professor Peter Morey
Highest qualification & position held:	(PhD) Chair in 20th Century English Literature
School/Department	EDACS/English Literature
Telephone:	[REDACTED]
Email address:	[REDACTED]

#### b) PLEASE GIVE DETAILS OF ANY CO-INVESTIGATORS OR CO-SUPERVISORS (FOR PGR STUDENT PROJECTS)

Name: <small>title / first name / family name</small>	
Highest qualification & position held:	
School/Department	
Telephone:	
Email address:	

#### c) In the case of PGR student projects, please give details of the student

Name of Course of Principal	Eva Momtaz	Student	[REDACTED]
	PhD	Email	[REDACTED]
	[REDACTED]		

Name of student:		Student No:	
Course of study:		Email address:	
Principal			

4. ESTIMATED START OF Date:  PROJECT

ESTIMATED END OF Date:  PROJECT

#### 5. FUNDING

List the funding sources (including internal sources) and give the status of each source.

Funding Body	Approved/Pending /To be submitted
University of Birmingham, College of Arts and Law Doctoral Scholarship	Approved

**If you are requesting a quick turnaround on your application, please explain the reasons below (including funding-related deadlines). You should be aware that whilst effort will be made in cases of genuine urgency, it will not always be possible for the Ethics Committees to meet such requests.**

We would be very grateful for a quick turnaround to enable Eva to start fieldwork and data collection as soon as possible.

#### 6. SUMMARY OF PROJECT

Describe the purpose, background rationale for the proposed project, as well as the hypotheses/research questions to be examined and expected outcomes. This description should be in everyday language that is free from jargon. Please explain any technical terms or discipline-specific phrases.

This project is the first to study British-Asian Muslim women's responses to John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In recent years, early modern studies have been galvanized by an interest in the responses of international and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) readers, audiences, and performers of canonical literary works. However, while such studies have helped enormously to redraw the map of contemporary literary engagements in the light of issues such as multilingualism, translation, interculturalism, post-colonialism, and race, very few have taken account of the intersection of these considerations with gender politics. This is despite the fact that, in the UK at least, female BAME students of English literature in higher education far outnumber their male counterparts. This project seeks to redress the balance by focusing on the encounter of British-Asian Muslim women of Bangladeshi, Indian, and Pakistani descent with John Milton's Christian epic, *Paradise Lost* (1667). Milton's poem speaks particularly profoundly to Muslim readers, dramatizing as it does an origin myth central to Islamic belief (though deviating, of course, from the Qur'anic account). A number of themes in the poem resonate powerfully with British-Asian Muslim women. These themes – which I designate as 'Rebellion', 'Sex', 'Sin', 'Power', and 'Patriarchy' – both overlap with and extend the catalogue of topics most often debated in the reception history of *Paradise Lost* (Leonard, 2013). In devoting a chapter each to readers' responses to these topics, the project aims to advance knowledge in three main ways.

First, it will contribute to the interpretative history of Milton's poem by considering the responses of minority ethnic female readers, adding to important recent work on Milton's international readers. Second, it will consider how the encounter with *Paradise Lost* informs the Muslimahs' negotiation of identity. How do questions concerning religion, politics, gender and morality raised by *Paradise Lost* relate to the complex challenges facing modern British Muslimahs, in both reclaiming cultural narratives and reshaping social norms? Third, the project observes that Muslimahs' encounters with *Paradise Lost* rarely occur in cultural isolation. This study, then, will show how readers' responses to literature are affected not only by cultural and religious upbringing, but also by the social and cultural interactions within which literary study takes place.

## 7. CONDUCT OF PROJECT

### Please give a description of the research methodology that will be used

The methodology for this study combines reader-reception theories and practical fieldwork. Existing studies of the reception of *Paradise Lost* have tended to assume an implied reader, the characteristics of which change little over time. However, theorists of hermeneutics have long recognized the limitations of such an approach, and distinguish carefully between 'implied' and 'actual' readers (Iser, 1974; Jauss, 1982). This study, therefore, building on Islam Issa's account of contemporary Egyptian Sunni Muslim readers of *Paradise Lost* in Arabic translation (2017), will establish a representative sample of 'actual' readers (South-Asian Muslimahs in the Midlands), which recognizes the particularity of individual responses while also investigating areas of shared concern across the sample.

The project will involve practical fieldwork, initially focussing on gathering evidence from the experiences of British-Asian Muslim women in the Midlands. Data collection will be carried out through surveys and questionnaires, interviews, reading journals, focus groups, and essays and dissertations written by British-Asian Muslim women studying *Paradise Lost* at eight universities in Birmingham, Coventry, Leicester, and Nottingham. The rationale for selecting these eight universities is pragmatic (i.e. what can be accomplished in the three years of the doctorate). The Midlands has the largest non-White population outside of London, with 'Asian' or 'Asian British' comprising the largest proportion (ONS, 2012). However, the PGR and her supervisors remain open to the possibility of extending the study to other UK regions, if it proves feasible to do so.

## 8. DOES THE PROJECT INVOLVE PARTICIPATION OF PEOPLE OTHER THAN THE RESEARCHERS AND SUPERVISORS?

Yes  No

Note: 'Participation' includes both active participation (such as when participants take part in an interview) and cases where participants take part in the study without their knowledge and consent at the time (for example, in crowd behaviour research).

**If you have answered NO please go to Section 18. If you have answered YES to this question please complete all the following sections.**

## 9. PARTICIPANTS AS THE SUBJECTS OF THE RESEARCH

Describe the number of participants and important characteristics (such as age, gender, location, affiliation, level of fitness, intellectual ability etc.). Specify any inclusion/exclusion criteria to be used.

This project has a primary focus on the reading experiences of British Asian Muslim women and is also interested in responses to Milton's *Paradise Lost* more broadly. The participants will therefore include approximately 50-100 British men and women in the United Kingdom who have encountered *Paradise Lost* in higher education. Participants will include both undergraduate and postgraduate students, and, in addition to the British Asian Muslim women at the centre of the study, other participants can be of any age, gender, race, or religion.

Participants will also include higher education lecturers and teachers of *Paradise Lost*, of any age, gender, race, or religion.

There will be no further inclusion/exclusion criteria.

## 10. RECRUITMENT

Please state clearly how the participants will be identified, approached and recruited. Include any relationship between the investigator(s) and participant(s) (e.g. instructor-student).

*Note: Attach a copy of any poster(s), advertisement(s) or letter(s) to be used for recruitment.*

1. There will be an initial online survey (via SurveyMonkey) of higher education lecturers regarding their teaching of *Paradise Lost* in the UK, currently and in the future.
2. Emails/Letters will also be sent out to higher education institutions regarding student enrolment in courses teaching *Paradise Lost*.
3. Email/Letters will also be sent to individual students inviting them to participate.
4. An advertisement for potential participants will also be posted on the British Milton Seminar blog (<https://britishmiltonseminar.wordpress.com/>), which has approximately 100 followers (chiefly teachers and postgraduates studying Milton).
5. Advertisements for potential participants will also be circulated among Islamic Societies in UK higher education Institutions.

Please see sample advertisement/letter/email attached.

## 11. CONSENT

**a)** Describe the process that the investigator(s) will be using to obtain valid consent. If consent is not to be obtained explain why. If the participants are minors or for other reasons are not competent to consent, describe the proposed alternate source of consent, including any permission / information letter to be provided to the person(s) providing the consent.

1. Participants will be given a Participant Information Sheet explaining the purpose of the study and what will happen to their data. They can take this information away to ensure they have time to consider the information (approximately a week). See Participant Information sheet attached.
2. During this time they can ask the project leader (Eva Momtaz) if they have any further questions (using the contact details provided on the form).
3. Participants will be asked to sign a consent form (see attached) immediately prior to participating in the study.

*Note: Attach a copy of the Participant Information Sheet (if applicable), the Consent Form (if applicable), the content of any telephone script (if applicable) and any other material that will be used in the consent process.*

**b) Will the participants be deceived in any way about the purpose of the study?** Yes  No

If yes, please describe the nature and extent of the deception involved. Include how and when the deception will be revealed, and who will administer this feedback.

N/A

## 12. PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

Explain what feedback/ information will be provided to the participants after participation in the research. (For example, a more complete description of the purpose of the research, or access to the results of the research).

Participants will be provided with a general interim summary or report on the progress of the study after participating in the research. They will also be able to see the finished PhD thesis, subject to embargo.

## 13. PARTICIPANT WITHDRAWAL

**a) Describe how the participants will be informed of their right to withdraw from the project.**

Participants will be informed of their right to withdraw on the consent form which will clearly state that they can do so both during and after the study. Eva Montaz's contact details will be provided on the consent form for this purpose.

Participants will be given two months to withdraw from the study after taking part. Any data collected from a participant who wishes to withdraw will be removed from the study and deleted.

- b) Explain any consequences for the participant of withdrawing from the study and indicate what will be done with the participant's data if they withdraw.**

In the event that this occurs, there will be no consequences for the participant withdrawing from the study. Their data will be removed from the study unless they give explicit consent for it to be retained.

#### 14. COMPENSATION

Will participants receive compensation for participation?

i) Financial

**Yes**

**No**

ii) Non-financial

**No**

**Yes**

If **Yes** to **either** i) or ii) above, please provide details.

N/A

If participants choose to withdraw, how will you deal with compensation?

N/A

#### 15. CONFIDENTIALITY

a) Will all participants be anonymous?

**Yes**

**No**

b) Will all data be treated as confidential?

**Yes**

**No**



*Note: Participants' identity/data will be confidential if an assigned ID code or number is used, but it will not be anonymous. Anonymous data cannot be traced back to an individual participant.*

Describe the procedures to be used to ensure anonymity of participants and/or confidentiality of data both during the conduct of the research and in the release of its findings.

Participants' identity/data will be assigned an ID code. Confidentiality of data will be ensured by the fact that only the project leader and her co-supervisors will have access to the data. No individual participants will be identified in the completed thesis, nor in any published articles, outputs, or any other public dissemination of the project's findings.

Anonymity/confidentiality will be clearly explained on the participant information sheet.

If participant anonymity or confidentiality is not appropriate to this research project, explain, providing details of how all participants will be advised of the fact that data will not be anonymous or confidential.

N/A

#### 16. STORAGE, ACCESS AND DISPOSAL OF DATA

Describe what research data will be stored, where, for what period of time, the measures that will be put in place to ensure security of the data, who will have access to the data, and the method and timing of disposal of the data.

The survey data will be stored on secured encrypted devices and on secure UoB servers once retrieved from SurveyMonkey.

The hard data (consent forms) will be stored in a locked filing cabinet which only Eva Momtaz (PhD student) and Hugh Adlington (lead supervisor) will have access to. This data will be disposed of within one week once it has been scanned and uploaded onto the UoB secure server.

Interviews will be recorded on encrypted devices which will be deleted two weeks after being transcribed.

17. OTHER APPROVALS REQUIRED? e.g. Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks or NHS R&D approvals.

YES

NO

x

NOT APPLICABLE

If yes, please specify.

## 18. SIGNIFICANCE/BENEFITS

Outline the potential significance and/or benefits of the research

Existing studies of Milton's female readers are few. My own study will take an intersectional approach, paying close attention to the ways in which identity markers of ethnicity, gender, class, culture, and religion overlap. Building on Islam Issa's account of contemporary Egyptian Sunni Muslim readers of *Paradise Lost* in Arabic translation (2017), my study will establish a representative sample of 'actual' readers (South-Asian Muslimahs in the Midlands), which recognizes the particularity of individual responses while also investigating areas of shared concern across the sample. Key critical context concerns the experience of British South-Asian women in higher education in the UK. Recent sociological studies have celebrated the increased participation of this group in higher education, and how this has enabled them to forge alternative gender identities in comparison to previous generations (Bagguley and Hussain, 2007). However, other studies also recognize that higher education is a context that both enables *and* constrains negotiations of identity for this group (Hussain et al., 2017). It is with these sociological considerations in mind, then, that my project aims to give voice to British South-Asian Muslimah readers of *Paradise Lost*, taking cues both from recent calls to generate new questions of why, how, and where Milton matters (Currell and Gleyzon, 2015), and from the urgent need in contemporary British society to exploit the potential of English literature for bridging, as well as diagnosing, cultural difference.

## 19. RISKS

a) Outline any potential risks to **INDIVIDUALS**, including research staff, research participants, other individuals not involved in the research and the measures that will be taken to minimise any risks and the procedures to be adopted in the event of mishap

There may be cultural challenges when working with participants on certain sensitive topics. Such topics might include theological prohibitions of the figural depiction of God, and other aspects of religious belief, morality/ethics, sexuality, and gender politics.

To minimise risk, the identity of participants will be kept entirely confidential. Conducting one-to-one interviews through Skype will also be a further way of minimising risks to individuals from their participation in the project.

**b)** Outline any potential risks to **THE ENVIRONMENT and/or SOCIETY** and the measures that will be taken to minimise any risks and the procedures to be adopted in the event of mishap.

We will minimise any potential risks to the environment and/or society by keeping all data and detailed findings from the project confidential until completion of the thesis.

However, where publication opportunities arise during the course of the PhD, we will evaluate any potential risks and consider the appropriate procedures to be adopted.

At the point of completion of the thesis, we will consider publication and dissemination strategies as appropriate.

We will also design a communications response plan for use in the unlikely event of an outbreak of negative publicity surrounding the project.

**20. ARE THERE ANY OTHER ETHICAL ISSUES RAISED BY THE RESEARCH?**

Yes  No

**If yes, please specify**

## 21. EXPERT REVIEWER/OPINION

You may be asked to nominate an expert reviewer for certain types of project, including those of an interventional nature or those involving significant risks. If you anticipate that this may apply to your work and you would like to nominate an expert reviewer at this stage, please provide details below.

Name
Contact details (including email address)
Brief explanation of reasons for nominating and/or nominee's suitability

## 22. CHECKLIST

Please mark if the study involves any of the following:

- Vulnerable groups, such as children and young people aged under 18 years, those with learning disability, or cognitive impairments
- Research that induces or results in or causes anxiety, stress, pain or physical discomfort, or poses a risk of harm to participants (which is more than is expected from everyday life)
- Risk to the personal safety of the researcher
- Deception or research that is conducted without full and informed consent of the participants at the time study is carried out
- Administration of a chemical agent or vaccines or other substances (including vitamins or food substances) to human participants.
- Production and/or use of genetically modified plants or microbes
- Results that may have an adverse impact on the environment or food safety
- Results that may be used to develop chemical or biological weapons

Please check that the following documents are attached to your application.

	ATTACHED	NOT APPLICABLE
Recruitment advertisement	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Participant information sheet	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Consent form	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Questionnaire	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Interview Schedule	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

### 23. DECLARATION BY APPLICANTS

I submit this application on the basis that the information it contains is confidential and will be used by the University of Birmingham for the purposes of ethical review and monitoring of the research project described herein, and to satisfy reporting requirements to regulatory bodies. The information will not be used for any other purpose without my prior consent.

I declare that:

- The information in this form together with any accompanying information is complete and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief and I take full responsibility for it.
- I undertake to abide by University Code of Practice for Research ([http://www.as.bham.ac.uk/legislation/docs/COP\\_Research.pdf](http://www.as.bham.ac.uk/legislation/docs/COP_Research.pdf)) alongside any other relevant professional bodies' codes of conduct and/or ethical guidelines.
- I will report any changes affecting the ethical aspects of the project to the University of Birmingham Research Ethics Officer.
- I will report any adverse or unforeseen events which occur to the relevant Ethics Committee via the University of Birmingham Research Ethics Officer.

**Name of principal investigator/project**

Hugh Adlington

**Date:**

29/11/18

Please now save your completed form, print a copy for your records, and then email a copy to the Research Ethics Officer, at [aer-ethics@contacts.bham.ac.uk](mailto:aer-ethics@contacts.bham.ac.uk). As noted above, please do not submit a paper copy.

**From:** Susan Cottam (Research Support Group)  
**Sent:** 28 January 2019 15:48  
**To:** Hugh Adlington (Department of English Literature); Peter Morey (Department of English Literature)  
**Cc:** Eva Momtaz (PhD Dept of Eng Literature FT)  
**Subject:** Application for Ethical Review ERN\_18-1652

Dear Dr Adlington and Professor Morey

**Re: “Milton and the Modern Muslimah: *Paradise Lost* and British-Asian Muslim Women”  
 Application for Ethical Review ERN\_18-1652**

Thank you for the above application, which has now been considered by the Humanities & Social Sciences Ethical Review Committee.

The Committee has requested further information and amendments in relation to the following issues, to enable it to reach a decision on your application:

- Given the stated focus of the study on Muslim women’s responses to *Paradise Lost*, the Committee queried why it will also include data from Muslim men and non-Muslims, higher education lecturers and teachers. Although it is understood that you will also be looking at responses to *Paradise Lost* more broadly, it was queried what you will do if most of the participants end up not being Muslim women – how will this impact upon the study? It was felt that all of the participant documentation, including the recruitment material, should explain the focus upon the Modern Muslimah.
- It was noted that a wide variety of data collection methods will be used and the Committee queried why all of these will be necessary and how they will build upon each other and/or fit together.
- Please clarify why Sufism is separated out as a separate question regarding the Muslim religion in the participant questionnaire.
- Why is it considered necessary to ask participants about their sexual orientation?
- Please be aware of the data storage and retention requirements in the University’s Code of Practice for Research (available at [http://www.as.bham.ac.uk/legislation/docs/COP\\_Research.pdf](http://www.as.bham.ac.uk/legislation/docs/COP_Research.pdf)). In particular, please note that following completion of the research, data should normally be preserved and accessible for ten years.

I look forward to your response to the points above. When responding, please highlight any changes made to the study documentation and/or provide a separate document/email detailing how each of the Committee’s points have been addressed.

Please confirm receipt by return email.

Kind regards

**Susan Cottam**  
 Research Ethics Officer  
 Research Support Group

C Block Dome  
Aston Webb Building  
University of Birmingham  
Edgbaston B15 2TT

Tel: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

Web: <https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/finance/RSS/Research-Support-Group/Research-Ethics/index.aspx>

Please remember to submit a new [Self-Assessment Form](#) for each new project.

You can also email our team mailbox [ethics-queries@contacts.bham.ac.uk](mailto:ethics-queries@contacts.bham.ac.uk) with any queries relating to the University's ethics process.

Click [Research Governance](#) for further details regarding the University's Research Governance and Clinical Trials Insurance processes, or email [researchgovernance@contacts.bham.ac.uk](mailto:researchgovernance@contacts.bham.ac.uk) with any queries relating to research governance.

Notice of Confidentiality:

The contents of this email may be privileged and are confidential. It may not be disclosed to or used by anyone other than the addressee, nor copied in any way. If received in error please notify the sender and then delete it from your system. Should you communicate with me by email, you consent to the University of Birmingham monitoring and reading any such correspondence.

4 February 2019

**'Milton and the Modern Muslimah: *Paradise Lost* and British-Asian Muslim Women'  
Application for Ethical Review ERN\_18-1652**

We would like to thank the Humanities & Social Sciences Ethical Review Committee for the points that it raises in regard to our ethical review application. We have provided our responses below to each of the five points raised, and amended wording where appropriate in the four supporting documents: 1) Participant information sheet; 2) Consent form; 3) Recruitment advertisement; 4) Participant questionnaire.

**Point 1:**

- **Given the stated focus of the study on Muslim women's responses to *Paradise Lost*, the Committee queried why it will also include data from Muslim men and non-Muslims, higher education lecturers and teachers. Although it is understood that you will also be looking at responses to *Paradise Lost* more broadly, it was queried what you will do if most of the participants end up not being Muslim women – how will this impact upon the study? It was felt that all of the participant documentation, including the recruitment material, should explain the focus upon the Modern Muslimah.**

**Response:**

We want to reassure the Committee that the project's first priority is to recruit Muslim women for the project. We will ensure sufficient levels of participation by this particular group through carefully targeted invitations to participate, alongside more open calls to students and teachers in general (including Muslim men and non-Muslims). The comparative data from groups other than Muslim women are an essential component of the study, but we accept the Committee's view that all of the participant documentation, including the recruitment material, should explain the focus upon the Modern Muslimah. We have therefore amended the documentation accordingly.

**Point 2:**

- **It was noted that a wide variety of data collection methods will be used and the Committee queried why all of these will be necessary and how they will build upon each other and/or fit together.**

**Response:**

We acknowledge that a variety of data collection methods will be used, but wish to reassure the Committee that the proposed combination of quantitative and qualitative methods is appropriate and necessary for a reader-reception study of this kind. The rationale for the methods used and how they fit together is as follows:

- 1) participant questionnaires provide us with our core quantitative data, derived from individual responses;



- 2) 1:1 interviews allow us to delve more deeply into the answers given to the questionnaire by some (but not all) participants - this is an opportunity to enrich the quantitative questionnaire data with qualitative data arising from in-depth discussion;
- 3) reading journals provide a further tranche of information about individual reading habits and responses to *Paradise Lost*, but obtained over a sustained period of time rather than in a single in-depth interview; this method of recording a reader's responses to a text over several months provides insights into the ways in which a reader's response evolves or develops over time.
- 4) the focus groups add a crucial social dimension to the study; Muslim women typically study *Paradise Lost* in small and large group classes, composed of students of different sexes, cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. Focus groups, by facilitating discussion between participants, capture data specifically about the experience of studying in that kind of group environment.

**Point 3:**

- **Please clarify why Sufism is separated out as a separate question regarding the Muslim religion in the participant questionnaire.**

**Response:**

Sufism is separated out as a separate question regarding the Muslim religion in the participant questionnaire because Sufism is not a distinct sect or school of thought in Islam, as is the case with the groups listed in Q.3 in the questionnaire. Rather, Sufism is best thought of as an approach or way of understanding religion, concerned with mystical communal rituals that are believed to lead to spiritual growth. For the study's purposes, it is useful to know whether a participant identifies themselves as a Sufi because this identity brings a different focus to questions of art and representation, and to the ways in which a reader might interpret *Paradise Lost*.

**Point 4:**

- **Why is it considered necessary to ask participants about their sexual orientation?**

**Response:**

We consider it necessary ask participants about their sexual orientation because the project's working hypothesis holds that a reader's identity informs their interpretation of the text in important ways. We anticipate that Muslim women readers encountering *Paradise Lost's* portrayal of sexual and gender relations may see them differently to the way in which male Muslim readers or non-Muslims read the same passages. Similarly, we anticipate that for an individual Muslim woman reader, sexual orientation is likely to affect how that reader responds the sexual and gender relations portrayed the text.

We therefore consider it necessary to ask participants about their sexual orientation in order to be able to understand more clearly their responses to questions about gender and sexuality in *Paradise Lost*.

**Point 5:**

- **Please be aware of the data storage and retention requirements in the University's Code of Practice for Research (available at [http://www.as.bham.ac.uk/legislation/docs/COP\\_Research.pdf](http://www.as.bham.ac.uk/legislation/docs/COP_Research.pdf)). In particular, please note that following completion of the research, data should normally be preserved and accessible for ten years.**

**Response:**

Thank you for informing us of these data storage and retention requirements. We have amended the project documentation accordingly.

**From:** Susan Cottam (Research Support Group)  
**Sent:** 19 February 2019 11:00  
**To:** Hugh Adlington (Department of English Literature); Peter Morey (Department of English Literature)  
**Cc:** Eva Momtaz (PhD Dept of Eng Literature FT)  
**Subject:** Application for Ethical Review ERN\_18-1652

Dear Dr Adlington and Professor Morey

**Re: "Milton and the Modern Muslimah: *Paradise Lost* and British-Asian Muslim Women"**  
**Application for Ethical Review ERN\_18-1652**

Thank you for your application for ethical review for the above project, which was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Ethical Review Committee.

On behalf of the Committee, I confirm that this study now has full ethical approval.

I would like to remind you that any substantive changes to the nature of the study as described in the Application for Ethical Review, and/or any adverse events occurring during the study should be promptly brought to the Committee's attention by the Principal Investigator and may necessitate further ethical review.

Please also ensure that the relevant requirements within the University's Code of Practice for Research and the information and guidance provided on the University's ethics webpages (available at <https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/finance/accounting/Research-Support-Group/Research-Ethics/Links-and-Resources.aspx> ) are adhered to and referred to in any future applications for ethical review. It is now a requirement on the revised application form (<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/finance/accounting/Research-Support-Group/Research-Ethics/Ethical-Review-Forms.aspx> ) to confirm that this guidance has been consulted and is understood, and that it has been taken into account when completing your application for ethical review.

Please be aware that whilst Health and Safety (H&S) issues may be considered during the ethical review process, you are still required to follow the University's guidance on H&S and to ensure that H&S risk assessments have been carried out as appropriate. For further information about this, please contact your School H&S representative or the University's H&S Unit at [athhealthandsafety@contacts.bham.ac.uk](mailto:athhealthandsafety@contacts.bham.ac.uk).

Kind regards

**Susan Cottam**  
Research Ethics Officer  
Research Support Group  
C Block Dome  
Aston Webb Building  
University of Birmingham  
Edgbaston B15 2TT

 ac.uk

<p><b>UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL REVIEW – REQUEST FOR AMENDMENTS</b></p>
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**Who should use this form:**

- This form is to be completed by PIs or supervisors (for PGR student research) who are requesting ethical approval for amendments to research projects that have previously received ethical approval from the University of Birmingham.

**Please be aware that all new research projects undertaken by postgraduate research (PGR) students first registered as from 1st September 2008 will be subject to the University's Ethical Review Process. PGR students first registered before 1<sup>st</sup> September 2008 should refer to their Department/School/College for further advice.**

- What constitutes an amendment?

Amendments requiring approval may include, but are not limited to, additions to the research protocol, study population, recruitment of participants, access to personal records, research instruments, or participant information and consent documentation. Amendments must be approved before they are implemented.

**NOTES:**

- Answers to questions must be entered in the space provided
- An electronic version of the completed form should be submitted to the Research Ethics Officer, at the following email address: [aer-ethics@contacts.bham.ac.uk](mailto:aer-ethics@contacts.bham.ac.uk). Please **do not** submit paper copies.
- If, in any section, you find that you have insufficient space, or you wish to supply additional material not specifically requested by the form, please submit it in a separate file, clearly marked and attached to the submission email.
- If you have any queries about the form, please address them to the Research Ethics Team.

**UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM  
APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL REVIEW -  
REQUEST FOR AMENDMENTS**

**OFFICE USE  
ONLY:**  
Application No:  
Date Received:

**1. TITLE OF PROJECT**

Milton and the Modern Muslimah: *Paradise Lost* and British-Asian Muslim Women

**2. APPROVAL DETAILS**

What is the Ethical Review Number (ERN) for the project?

ERN\_18-1652

**3. THIS PROJECT IS:**

University of Birmingham Staff Research project

University of Birmingham Postgraduate Research (PGR) student project

Other  (Please specify):

**4. INVESTIGATORS**

**d) PLEASE GIVE DETAILS OF THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS OR SUPERVISORS (FOR PGR STUDENT PROJECTS)**

Name: <small>T t e / f r s t n a m e / f a m y n a m e</small>	Professor Hugh Adlington
Highest qualification & position held:	PhD, Professor of English Literature
School/Department	EDACS/English Literature
Telephone:	[REDACTED]
Email address:	[REDACTED]

Name: <small>T t e / f r s t n a m e / f a m y n a m e</small>	Professor Peter Morey
Highest qualification & position held:	PhD, Chair in Twentieth-Century English Literature
School/Department	EDACS/English Literature
Telephone:	[REDACTED]
Email address:	[REDACTED]

**e) PLEASE GIVE DETAILS OF ANY CO-INVESTIGATORS OR CO-SUPERVISORS (FOR PGR STUDENT PROJECTS)**

Name: <small>T t e / f r s t n a m e / f a m y n a m e</small>	
Highest qualification & position held:	
School/Department	
Telephone:	
Email address:	

**f) In the case of PGR student projects, please give details of the student**

Name of student:	Eva Momtaz	Student No:	██████████
Course of study:	PhD English Literature		
Principal supervisor:	Prof. Hugh Adlington		

Name of student:		Student No:	
Course of study:			
Principal supervisor:			

5. **ESTIMATED START OF PROJECT**

Date:

**ESTIMATED END OF PROJECT**

Date:

## 6. ORIGINAL APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL REVIEW AND ANY SUBSEQUENT APPROVED AMENDMENTS:

Please complete the table below for the original application and any subsequent amendments submitted

Title and reference number of application or amendment	Key points of application and/or changes made by amendment (include: aims of study, participant details, how participants were recruited and methodology)	Ethical considerations arising from these key points (e.g. gaining consent, risks to participants and/or researcher, points raised by Ethical Review Committee during review)	How were the ethical considerations addressed? (e.g. consent form, participant information, adhering to relevant procedures/clearance required)
<p><i>Original application</i>            'Milton and the Modern Muslimah: Paradise Lost and British-Asian Muslim Women' (ERN_18-1652)</p>	<p><b>Aims of the study:</b> to study British-Asian Muslim women's responses to John Milton's <i>Paradise Lost</i>.</p> <p><b>Participant details:</b> Participants will include approximately 50-100 British men and women in the UK who have encountered <i>Paradise Lost</i> in higher education. Participants will include both undergraduate and postgraduate students, and, in addition to the British Asian Muslim women at the centre of the study, other participants can be of any age, gender, race, or religion. Participants will also include higher education lecturers and teachers of <i>Paradise Lost</i>, of any age, gender, race, or religion. There will be no further inclusion/exclusion criteria.</p> <p><b>How students are recruited:</b> working in collaboration with UK universities, the PGR (Eva Momtaz) has invited expressions</p>	<p>(i) <b>Gaining consent</b></p> <p>(ii) <b>Risks to individuals:</b> There may be cultural challenges when working with participants on certain sensitive topics. Such topics might include theological prohibitions of the figural depiction of God, and other aspects of religious belief, morality/ethics, sexuality, and gender politics.</p> <p>(iii) <b>Risks to the environment and/or society.</b></p> <p><b>Points raised by Ethical Review Committee during review:</b>  <b>(see details in table below)</b></p>	<p>(i) Consent form and participant information sheet.</p> <p>(ii) To minimise risk, the identity of participants will be kept entirely confidential. Conducting one-to-one interviews through Skype will also be a further way of minimising risks to individuals from their participation in the project.</p> <p>(iii) We will minimise any potential risks to the environment and/or society by keeping all data and detailed findings from the project confidential until completion of the thesis. Where publication opportunities arise during the course of the PhD, we will evaluate any potential risks and</p>

	<p>of interest from students studying <i>Paradise Lost</i>. (This includes those currently studying <i>Paradise Lost</i> at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and those who have recently done so.) When students register their interest, they are sent a consent form and participant information. When they have signed the consent form, they are sent the project questionnaire.</p> <p><b>Methodology:</b> data is gathered via responses to the questionnaire, and where relevant, through interviews, reading journals, and focus groups.</p>		<p>consider the appropriate procedures to be adopted. At the point of completion of the thesis, we will consider publication and dissemination strategies as appropriate. We will also design a communications response plan for use in the unlikely event of an outbreak of negative publicity surrounding the project.</p>
<i>Subsequent amendment 1</i>			
<i>Subsequent amendment 2</i>			
<i>Subsequent amendment 3</i>			



**Ethical considerations arising from these key points (e.g. gaining consent, risks to participants and/or researcher, points raised by Ethical Review Committee during review)**

**How were the ethical considerations addressed? (e.g. consent form, participant information, adhering to relevant procedures/clearance required)**

1. Given the stated focus of the study on Muslim women's responses to *Paradise Lost*, the Committee queried why the project would also include data from Muslim men and non-Muslims, higher education lecturers and teachers. It was felt that all of the participant documentation, including the recruitment material, should explain the focus upon the Modern Muslimah.
2. It was noted that a wide variety of data collection methods would be used and the Committee queried why all of these would be necessary and how they would build upon each other and/or fit together.
3. The Committee asked for clarification as to why Sufism was separated out as a separate question regarding the Muslim religion in the participant questionnaire.
4. The Committee asked why was considered necessary to ask participants about their sexual orientation.
5. The Committee noted that following completion of the research, data should normally be preserved and accessible for ten years.

1. Response: The comparative data from groups other than Muslim women are regarded as an essential component of the study. But it was agreed that all of the participant documentation, including the recruitment material, should explain the focus upon the Modern Muslimah. The documentation was amended accordingly.
2. Response: The rationale for the methods used and how they fit together was explained. The Committee accepted that all of the following data collection methods were necessary: participant questionnaires; 1: 1 interviews; reading journals; focus groups.
3. Response: Sufism was separated out as a separate question because Sufism is not a distinct sect or school of thought in Islam, as is the case with the groups listed in Q3 in the questionnaire. Rather, Sufism is best thought of as an approach or way of understanding religion, concerned with mystical communal rituals that are believed to lead to spiritual growth. For the study's purposes, it is useful to know whether a participant identifies themselves as a Sufi because this identity brings a different focus to questions of art and representation, and to the ways in which a reader might interpret *Paradise Lost*.
4. Response: Because the project's working hypothesis holds that a reader's identity informs their interpretation of the text in important ways. We anticipate that Muslim women readers encountering *Paradise Lost's* portrayal of sexual and gender relations may see them differently to the way in which male Muslim readers or non-Muslims read the same passages. Similarly, we anticipate that for an individual Muslim woman reader, sexual orientation is likely to affect how that reader responds the sexual and gender relations portrayed the text.
5. This project documentation was amended accordingly.

## 7. DETAILS OF PROPOSED NEW AMENDMENT

Provide details of the proposed new amendment, and clearly and explicitly state how the proposed new amendment will differ from the details of the study as already approved (see Q6 above).

An opportunity has arisen to collect data from Muslim women readers of *Paradise Lost* in the USA and Canada. The project leader (Eva Momtaz) has been contacted by a group of such readers who would be willing to participate in the study (via completion of the questionnaire).

We would therefore like to propose **amending the geographical scope of the study**. Although the focus of the study would remain British Muslim women readers of *Paradise Lost*, we would like, where opportunities arise, to collect data from Muslim women readers of *Paradise Lost* in countries outside of the UK.

## 8. JUSTIFICATION FOR PROPOSED NEW AMENDMENT

Expanding the geographical scope of the study in this way will provide the project with a valuable basis for international comparison.

As has been explained above, the underlying premise of the study is that a reader's race, religion, and sex informs their interpretation of Milton's epic poem. However, another of the project's governing principles is that comparative data (from groups other than British Muslim women) provide an invaluable alternative perspective from which to understand the patterns and significance of data collected from the study's principal target group of readers (i.e. British Muslim women).

At the outset of the project, it was thought that comparative data would chiefly derive from other British readers of *Paradise Lost* (i.e. men, both Muslim and non-Muslim; and non-Muslim women). However, the inclusion in the study of English-speaking Muslim women readers based in North America would allow fresh comparisons to be made between female Muslim readers in different countries. This could yield fascinating insights into the way in which different national cultures and systems of higher (and secondary) education contribute to different interpretations of a canonical work of English literature such as Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

It is also worth noting the practical point that recruitment of participants in the UK has been slower to date than initially hoped. The inclusion of data from North America would, therefore, in purely numerical terms, provide valuable additional points of reference for the study.

## 9. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

What ethical considerations, if any, are raised by the proposed new amendment?

No new ethical considerations are raised by the proposed new amendment. Recruitment of participants will be handled in the same way as previously, as will anonymity, confidentiality, and storage and dissemination of data.

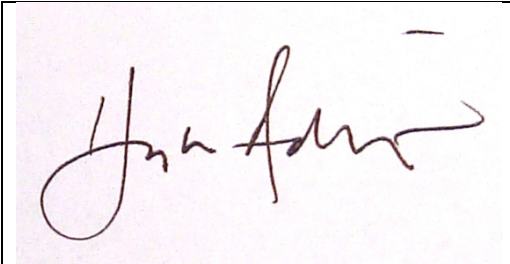
## DECLARATION BY APPLICANTS

I make this application on the basis that the information it contains is confidential and will be used by the University of Birmingham for the purposes of ethical review and monitoring of the research project described herein, and to satisfy reporting requirements to regulatory bodies. The information will not be used for any other purpose without my prior consent.

I declare that:

- The information in this form together with any accompanying information is complete and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief and I take full responsibility for it.
- I undertake to abide by University Code of Conduct for Research (<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/university/legal/research.pdf>) alongside any other relevant professional bodies' codes of conduct and/or ethical guidelines.
- I will report any changes affecting the ethical aspects of the project to the University of Birmingham Research Ethics Officer.
- I will report any adverse or unforeseen events which occur to the relevant Ethics Committee project to the University of Birmingham Research Ethics Officer.

**Signature of Principal investigator/project supervisor:**



5.8.19

**Date:**

**From:** Susan Cottam (Research Support Group)  
**Sent:** 16 August 2019 16:03  
**To:** Hugh Adlington (English Literature); Peter Morey (English Literature)  
**Cc:** Eva Momtaz (PhD Dept of Eng Literature FT)  
**Subject:** Application for amendment ERN\_18-1652A

Dear Professor Adlington and Professor Morey

**Re: "Milton and the Modern Muslimah: *Paradise Lost* and British-Asian Muslim Women"**  
**Application for amendment ERN\_18-1652A**

Thank you for the above application for amendment, which was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Ethical Review Committee.

On behalf of the Committee, I can confirm that this amendment now has full ethical approval.

I would like to remind you that any substantive changes to the nature of the study as now amended, and/or any adverse events occurring during the study should be promptly brought to the Committee's attention by the Principal Investigator and may necessitate further ethical review. A revised amendment application form is now available at <https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/finance/accounting/Research-Support-Group/Research-Ethics/Ethical-Review-Forms.aspx> . Please ensure this form is submitted for any further amendments.

Please also ensure that the relevant requirements within the University's Code of Practice for Research and the information and guidance provided on the University's ethics webpages (available at <https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/finance/accounting/Research-Support-Group/Research-Ethics/Links-and-Resources.aspx> ) are adhered to and referred to in any future applications for ethical review. It is now a requirement on the revised application form (<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/finance/accounting/Research-Support-Group/Research-Ethics/Ethical-Review-Forms.aspx> ) to confirm that this guidance has been consulted and is understood, and that it has been taken into account when completing your application for ethical review.

Please be aware that whilst Health and Safety (H&S) issues may be considered during the ethical review process, you are still required to follow the University's guidance on H&S and to ensure that H&S risk assessments have been carried out as appropriate. For further information about this, please contact your School H&S representative or the University's H&S Unit at [healthandsafety@contacts.bham.ac.uk](mailto:healthandsafety@contacts.bham.ac.uk).

If you require a hard copy of this correspondence, please let me know.

Kind regards

**Susan Cottam**  
Research Ethics Manager  
Research Support Group  
C Block Dome  
Aston Webb Building  
University of Birmingham  
Edgbaston B15 2TT

## Appendix B: Participant Information Guide and Data Protection Notice

### 'Milton and the Modern Muslimah: *Paradise Lost* and British-Asian Muslim Women': a reader-reception study

This project aims to uncover how John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is read and understood today, and how an individual's reading is influenced by cultural and/or religious identity. Though this study has a central focus upon Muslim women and their reading of *Paradise Lost*, for purposes of comparison, this research is also interested in the responses of both Muslim men and non-Muslims.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the evaluation study. Participation is voluntary, and any participant is free to withdraw at any time. Your involvement in the study is much appreciated, and will contribute to the interpretative history of Milton's epic, helping to understand how religious and cultural formation affects and shapes readers' understanding of the poem.

The study will use a number of methods of data collection. All participants will fill out the project questionnaire, which will take approximately 20 minutes to complete. For selected participants involved in focus groups and/or interviews, the former will last 30-45 minutes and the latter 20-30 minutes. Participants should seek further clarification if there is anything which you do not understand prior to participating.

Focus groups and interviews will be audio recorded for research purposes. Those taking part in them will be asked to sign an informed consent form to allow the researcher [Eva Momtaz] to use the audio recordings as data in the study. Be assured, however, that though your data will not be anonymous, it will be treated as strictly confidential. Only the researcher and the researcher's supervisors will have access to your data.

Extracts from transcripts of recordings and findings from questionnaires will be used as qualitative evidence in a thesis submitted for examination. Following the completion of the research, the data will be preserved and accessible for ten years. You will be provided with a general interim summary on the progress of the study after participating in the research and you will also be able to see the finished PhD thesis upon completion, subject to embargo.

#### Contact details

Eva Momtaz  
University of Birmingham  
Edgbaston  
Birmingham B15 2TT

Email: 

## **Data Protection Essentials**

In order to carry out the research project described above, we will need to collect information about you, and some of this information will be your personal data. Under data protection law, we have to provide you with very specific information about what we do with your data and about your rights. We have set out below the key information you need to know about how we will use your personal data.

The University of Birmingham's web page '[Data Protection - How the University Uses Your Data](#)' sets out much of this information, including how to ask any questions you may have about how your personal data is used, exercise any of your rights or complain about the way your data is being handled. The rest of the key information you need to know about how we used your personal data is set out below.

### **Who is the Data Controller?**

The University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT is the data controller for the personal data that we process in relation to you.

### **What data are we processing and for what purpose will we use it?**

We will collect and process your personal data to conduct the research project, as explained in the Participant Information Sheet.

### **What is our legal basis for processing your data?**

The legal justification we have under data protection law for processing your personal data is that it is necessary to do so for our research, which is a task we carry out in the public interest. These data will not be used to make decisions about you.

### **Who will my personal data be shared with?**

We will not share your data with any third party.

Sometimes, external organisations assist us with processing your information, for example, Qualtrics (parent company, Systeme, Anwendungen und Produkte in der Datenverarbeitung SE), which will provide an electronic survey service. These organisations act on our behalf in accordance with our instructions and do not process your data for any purpose over and above what we have asked them to do. We make sure we have appropriate contracts in place with them to protect and safeguard your data. If your personal data are transferred outside the European Union (for example, if one of our partners is based outside the EU or we use a cloud-based app with servers based outside the EU), we make sure that appropriate safeguards are in place to ensure the confidentiality and security of your personal data.

### **How long will my personal data be kept?**

Your data will be retained for 10 years after the completion of the research.

### **Are changes made to this webpage?**

This privacy notice is effective from 22 October 2019 and is reviewed when necessary. Any changes will be published here.

## Appendix C: Consent Form

### 'Milton and the Modern Muslimah: *Paradise Lost* and British-Asian Muslim Women': a reader-reception study

#### Fair Processing Statement

This information is being collected as part of a doctoral research project by Eva Momtaz (University of Birmingham), investigating modern day reader reception of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The project's central focus is upon Muslim women and their reading of *Paradise Lost*, but for purposes of comparison, the project is also interested in the responses of both Muslim men and non-Muslims.

The information which you supply and that which may be collected as part of the research project will be entered into a filing system or database and will only be accessed by authorised personnel involved in the project. Following the completion of the research, the data will be preserved and accessible for ten years. The information will be retained by the University of Birmingham and will only be used for the purpose of research, and statistical and audit purposes. By supplying this information you are consenting to the University storing your information for the purposes stated above. The information will be processed by the University of Birmingham in accordance with the provisions of the General Data Protection Regulation 2018. No identifiable personal data will be published.

#### Statements of understanding/consent

- I confirm that I have read and understand the participant information guide for this study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions if necessary and have had these answered satisfactorily.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw during the study and within two months after without giving any reason. If I withdraw my data will be removed from the study and will be destroyed.
- I understand that my personal data will be processed for the purposes detailed above, in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation 2018.
- Based upon the above, I agree to take part in this study.

#### Name, signature and date

Name of participant: ..... Date: ..... Signature: .....

Name of researcher  
obtaining consent:..... Date:..... Signature:.....

*A copy of the signed and dated consent form and the participant information leaflet should be given to the participant and retained by the researcher to be kept securely on file.*



## Appendix D: Preliminary Questionnaire for Tutors - SurveyMonkey

1. Please state your name, email address, institution and position.
2. At what level(s) is John Milton's *Paradise Lost* taught at your institution?

First-year survey course  
 -Second-year histories-of-literature modules  
 -Final-year optional modules  
 -Masters modules  
 -Other (please specify)

3. Please provide further details (i.e., the titles of relevant models/courses/papers, and their level)
4. Have you yourself taught *Paradise Lost* in 2018-2019?

-Yes  
 -No

5. If so, please provide further details (i.e., the title(s) of the modules/courses/papers taught, and the roles you played: e.g., module/course convenor, lecturer (large groups), seminar leader (small groups of three or more students), tutor (providing tutorials for pairs or individual students, dissertation/extended essay supervisor).
6. Will you be you be teaching *Paradise Lost* in 2019-2020?

-Yes  
 -No

7. If so, please provide further details (i.e., the title(s) of the modules/courses/papers taught, and the roles you played: e.g., module/course convenor, lecturer (large groups), seminar leader (small groups of three or more students), tutor (providing tutorials for pairs or individual students, dissertation/extended essay supervisor).
8. In your experience, does your cohort of students studying *Paradise Lost* generally include female Muslim students?

-Yes  
 -No  
 -Sometimes  
 -I don't know

## Appendix E: Qualtrics Online Questionnaire for Readers of *Paradise Lost*

### Participant Questionnaire for a reader-reception study of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

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#### Start of Block: consent

#### **CONSENT A reader-reception study of John Milton's *Paradise Lost***

This information is being collected as part of a doctoral research project by Eva Momtaz (University of Birmingham), investigating modern day reader reception of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The project's central focus is upon Muslim women and their reading of *Paradise Lost*, but for purposes of comparison, the project is also interested in the responses of both Muslim men and non-Muslims. The questionnaire will take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete. Participation is voluntary, and any participant is free to withdraw at any time. Your involvement is much appreciated, and will contribute to the interpretative history of Milton's epic, helping to understand how religious and cultural formation affects and shapes readers' understanding of the poem. The information which you supply and that which may be collected as part of the research project will be entered into a filing system or database and will only be accessed by authorised personnel involved in the project. Following the completion of the research, the data will be preserved and accessible for ten years. The information will be retained by the University of Birmingham and will only be used for the purpose of research, and statistical and audit purposes. By supplying this information you are consenting to the University storing your information for the purposes stated above. The information will be processed by the University of Birmingham in accordance with the provisions of the General Data Protection Regulation 2018. No identifiable personal data will be published. You may choose to stop participating at any time by contacting the researcher Eva Momtaz ( [REDACTED] ).

#### **Statements of understanding/consent**

- I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information guide for this study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions if necessary and have had these answered satisfactorily.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw during the study and within two months after without giving any reason. If I withdraw my data will be removed from the study and will be destroyed.
- I understand that my personal data will be processed for the purposes detailed above, in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation 2018.
- Based upon the above, I agree to take part in this study.

#### End of Block: consent

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#### Start of Block: demographic information

## INFO Participant questionnaire for a reader-reception study of John Milton's Paradise Lost

Full Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Home Town/City: \_\_\_\_\_

University: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

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Page Break \_\_\_\_\_

**Q1 1. What is your ethnic group?** *Choose one option that best describes your ethnic group or background*

English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British

Irish

Gypsy or Irish Traveller

Any other White background: please describe:

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White and Black Caribbean

White and Black Caribbean

White and Asian

Any other Mixed / Multiple ethnic background, please describe:

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Indian

Pakistani

Bangladeshi

Chinese

Any other Asian background, please describe:

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African

Caribbean

Any other Black / African / Caribbean background, please describe:

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Arab

Any other ethnic group, please describe:

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Page Break

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**Q2 2. Please indicate whether you identify with a particular religion.**

- I was raised/educated in a particular religion, but am no longer observant/practicing.
- I identify with a particular religion.
- I do not identify with any religion.

*Skip To: Q5 If 2. Please indicate whether you identify with a particular religion. = I do not identify with any religion.*

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*Display This Question:*

*If 2. Please indicate whether you identify with a particular religion. = I was raised/educated in a particular religion, but am no longer observant/practicing.*

**Q2b 2b. Please specify the religion in which you were raised.**

- Christian (including Church of England, Catholic, Protestant and all other Christian denominations)
- Buddhist
- Hindu
- Jewish
- Muslim
- Sikh
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_
- 

*Display This Question:*

*If 2. Please indicate whether you identify with a particular religion. = I identify with a particular religion.*

**Q3 3a. What is your religion?**

- Christian (including Church of England, Catholic, Protestant and all other Christian denominations)
- Buddhist
- Hindu
- Jewish
- Muslim
- Sikh
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_
- 

*Display This Question:*

*If 3a. What is your religion? = Muslim*

**Q52 3b. Would you classify yourself as a convert to Islam? If so, please state your background before your conversion.**

- Yes \_\_\_\_\_
- No
- 

Page Break \_\_\_\_\_

*Display This Question:*

*If 3a. What is your religion? = Muslim*

**Q4a 4a. Please specify which sect you belong to and your school of thought:**

- Sunni (non-denominational)
- Sunni- Hanafi
- Sunni- Hanbali
- Sunni- Shafi
- Sunni- Maliki
- Shia (non-denominational)
- Shia- Twelvers
- Shia- Ismaili
- Shia- Zaidi
- Ibadi
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_
- N/A

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Page Break

*Display This Question:*

*If 3a. What is your religion? = Muslim*

**Q4b 4b. Would you identify yourself as a Sufi?**

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

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Page Break

**Q5 5. What is your sexual orientation?**

- Heterosexual or straight
- Gay or lesbian
- Bisexual
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer not to say

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Page Break

**End of Block: demographic information**

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**Start of Block: levels of study**

**Q6 6. At what level did/do you study John Milton's *Paradise Lost*? (please select all that apply)**

- A-Levels
- Undergraduate level
- Masters level
- Doctoral research
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

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Page Break

**Q7 7. If you are a student, please state your current level of study:**



- Undergraduate student (please specify your current year of study)  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Masters student
- Doctoral Researcher
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_
- N/A

**End of Block: levels of study**

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**Start of Block: responses to characters**

Page Break \_\_\_\_\_

**Q9 9. Describe your response to God the Father in *Paradise Lost*. For instance, are you attracted to, sympathetic with, or unmoved by this character? Did your reaction remain the same or change the more you read of the poem? Can you reflect on or explain why you feel as you do about this character?**

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Page Break \_\_\_\_\_

**Q10 10. Describe your response to God the Son in *Paradise Lost*. For instance, are you attracted to, sympathetic with, or unmoved by this character? Did your reaction remain the same or change the more you read of the poem? Can you reflect on or explain why you feel as you do about this character?**

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Page Break

Q11 11. Describe your response to Satan in *Paradise Lost*. For instance, are you attracted to, sympathetic with, or unmoved by this character? Did your reaction remain the same or change the more you read of the poem? Can you reflect on or explain why you feel as you do about this character?

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Page Break

Q12 12. Describe your response to Adam in *Paradise Lost*. For instance, are you attracted to, sympathetic with, or unmoved by this character? Did your reaction remain the same or change the more you read of the poem? Can you reflect on or explain why you feel as you do about this character?

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Page Break

Q13 13. **Describe** your response to Eve in *Paradise Lost*. **For instance, are you attracted to, sympathetic with, or unmoved by this character? Did your reaction remain the same or change the more you read of the poem? Can you reflect on or explain why you feel as you do about this character?**

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Page Break

**End of Block: responses to characters**

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**Start of Block: words associated to characters**

Q14 14. Which words would you associate with the character of God the Father in *Paradise Lost*? (Please select all that apply)

- Authoritative
- Bad
- Cruel
- Duplicitous
- Evil
- Fair
- Feeble
- Fierce
- Forgiving
- Good
- Hero
- Inferior
- Innocent
- Kind
- Leader
- Malicious

- Merciful
- Powerful
- Submissive
- Superior
- Sympathetic
- Tyrant
- Unsympathetic
- Villain
- Warrior
- Weak
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

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Page Break

Q15 15. Which words would you associate with the character of God the Son in *Paradise Lost*? (Please select all that apply)

- Authoritative
- Bad
- Cruel
- Duplicitous
- Evil
- Fair
- Feeble
- Fierce
- Forgiving
- Good
- Hero
- Inferior
- Innocent
- Kind
- Leader
- Malicious

- Merciful
- Powerful
- Submissive
- Superior
- Sympathetic
- Tyrant
- Unsympathetic
- Villain
- Warrior
- Weak
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

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Page Break

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Q16 16. Which words would you associate with the character of Satan in *Paradise Lost*?  
(Please select all that apply)

Authoritative

Bad

Cruel

Duplicitous

Evil

Fair

Feeble

Fierce

Forgiving

Good

Hero

Inferior

Innocent

Kind

Leader

Malicious



- Merciful
- Powerful
- Submissive
- Superior
- Sympathetic
- Tyrant
- Unsympathetic
- Villain
- Warrior
- Weak
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

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Page Break

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Q17 17. Which words would you associate with the character of Adam in *Paradise Lost*?  
(Please select all that apply)

Authoritative

Bad

Cruel

Duplicitous

Evil

Fair

Feeble

Fierce

Forgiving

Good

Hero

Inferior

Innocent

Kind

Leader

Malicious

- Merciful
- Powerful
- Submissive
- Superior
- Sympathetic
- Tyrant
- Unsympathetic
- Villain
- Warrior
- Weak
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

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Page Break

Q18 18. Which words would you associate with the character of Eve in *Paradise Lost*?  
(Please select all that apply)

- Authoritative
- Bad
- Cruel
- Duplicitous
- Evil
- Fair
- Feeble
- Fierce
- Forgiving
- Good
- Hero
- Inferior
- Innocent
- Kind
- Leader
- Malicious

- Merciful
- Powerful
- Submissive
- Superior
- Sympathetic
- Tyrant
- Unsympathetic
- Villain
- Warrior
- Weak
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

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Page Break \_\_\_\_\_

**End of Block: words associated to characters**

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**Start of Block: influence**

Q19 19. Is *Paradise Lost* a poem that you would recommend others to read? Why?

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Page Break

Q20 20. Were you aware of the biblical story of Genesis before you encountered *Paradise Lost*?

Yes

No

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Page Break

Q21

21. Does your understanding of the story of Genesis in the Bible influence your reading of *Paradise Lost*? Please explain why and how.

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Page Break

Q22

22. If you are aware of the story of creation in the Qur'an, does it influence your reading and understanding of *Paradise Lost*? Please explain why and how.

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Page Break

Q23 23. Do you find the poem at all problematic? If yes, how?

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Page Break

**End of Block: influence**

**Start of Block: the fall**

Q24 24. In *Paradise Lost*, who do you blame for the Fall? Please select all that apply.

God the Father

God the Son

Satan

Adam

Eve

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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Page Break

Q25 25. Comment on your reasoning behind why your choice of character(s) is responsible for the Fall

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Page Break

**End of Block: the fall**

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**Start of Block: views, beliefs, and attitudes**

Q26 26. Discuss your view on gender and sexuality in Milton's *Paradise Lost*

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Page Break

Q27 27. Do you believe that your religious beliefs have shaped your understanding and reading of *Paradise Lost*? How and why?

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Page Break

Q28 28. Do you believe that your cultural traditions and social attitudes have shaped your understanding and reading of *Paradise Lost*? How and why?

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**End of Block: views, beliefs, and attitudes**

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## Appendix F: Interview Agenda for Readers

These questions are provisional and are subject to refinement as the project develops.

1. What is your ethnic group?
2. Do you identify yourself as belonging to a religion? If so, would you consider yourself as practising/observant?
3. Where/when did you study *Paradise Lost*?
4. When you were studying *Paradise Lost*, what were your seminars like?
5. Were there a variety of people from different faiths, backgrounds, genders present in your seminar?
6. How did this make you feel? Do you think this affected the seminar at all?
7. Generally, would you say that you speak up in seminars and contribute?
8. When you were studying *Paradise Lost*, did you contribute to discussion? How/when/why?
9. Do you remember the topics and themes that were discussed?
10. What did you most enjoy? Why?
11. What did you least enjoy? Why?
12. Would you encourage the poem to be read in multicultural settings? Why?
13. Would you encourage people with multicultural backgrounds to study the poem? Why?
14. Do you think that they would have the same response to the poem as you? How and why?

Further questions for Muslim participants:

15. How do you personally feel about the poem *Paradise Lost*?
16. What made you want to study it?
17. Would you study it again?
18. Milton's epic is based on the Bible's story of Genesis, do you think that there are any differences to the Qur'anic version of the story of creation? Explain.
19. Does this affect your attitude to and reading of *Paradise Lost*?
20. As a Muslim, are there any parts of *Paradise Lost* that make you feel uncomfortable? Why?
21. If you were leading a seminar and teaching *Paradise Lost*, is there anything that you personally wouldn't want to focus on? Why?

Further questions for participants who are female and of a South-Asian background:

22. Are you a 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> generation Pakistani/Bengali/Indian?
23. Which of your identities would you say is more dominant? Why?
24. Generally, do you think that your background as a South-Asian Muslim woman affects your readings of literary texts? How? Why?
25. Do you think that your background affected your reading of *Paradise Lost*? How? Why?
26. Do you like that this is the case?
27. Do you think that there are any taboo topics in your community? What are they?
28. Are there any parts of *Paradise Lost* that you would consider as culturally taboo for someone with your background? If so, what are they? Why?

29. Would you feel comfortable describing the narrative of *Paradise Lost* in detail to someone from your community? How do you think that they would react to the poem?
30. Is there anything from the narrative that you would omit when telling them? Why?
31. Would this be the case if you were to describe the poem to someone else who does not share your background?
32. In your seminar, do you feel confident to speak about your culture and identity?
33. Do you ever bring your cultural identity into discussions in seminar? Why? Or why not?

## Appendix G: Interview Agenda for Tutors

### Tutor Background:

1. What institution are you currently teaching at and what is your position?
2. At what level do you teach *Paradise Lost*?
3. What was/is the module called?
4. How many different cohorts have you taught?
5. What do you most enjoy teaching about *Paradise Lost*? Why?
6. What do you least enjoy teaching about *Paradise Lost*? Why?
7. What are some of the topics and themes that are discussed in your seminars?

### Classroom Atmosphere and Demographic:

8. In your experience, have there been a variety of students from different faiths, backgrounds and genders present in your seminar?
9. How do you think that the composition of different seminar groups – taking into account gender, socio-economic background, race, culture, religion – might have informed seminar discussions?
10. What do you think your students most enjoy discussing?
11. What do you think your students least enjoy discussing?
12. In your teaching of *Paradise Lost*, are you aware of there being any Muslim students present in your classes?
13. Did they seem more/less engaged than other students? Why? How?
14. Would you encourage the poem to be read in multicultural settings? Why?
15. Would you encourage people with BAME backgrounds to study the poem? Why?

### Decolonising the Curriculum:

16. Are you familiar with any efforts to “decolonise the curriculum?”
17. What does that mean to you?
18. With a canonical text like *Paradise Lost*, do you think that anything can be done in this regard?

### Teaching Methods:

19. Has there ever been anything that surprised you whilst teaching *Paradise Lost*?
20. How do you support students who are unfamiliar with key concepts and ideas within *Paradise Lost*? How do you support them in understanding the text better?
21. What kinds of sources and scholars do you use to aid your delivery of teaching *Paradise Lost*?
22. Is there anything that you would like to mention or add?
23. Do you have any questions for me?

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