PARADISE LOST AS AN EPIC POEM

An epic is a long narrative poem which has a lofty and sublime subject presented in dignified style and ornamental language. The characters introduced in an epic must belong to the highest class in a society. They must be distinguished and above the common men by birth possession and manners. An epic is never without a conflict existing between two forces. The action must involve heroic deeds and there is an array of armies and luster of weapons. Its theme is never without a sublime moral. Homer and Virgil were the two great masters of classical epic. Homer wrote Iliad and Virgil wrote Aeneid. For these two master-pieces, Homer and Virgil became models for the poet like Milton.

Milton wished to be one with Homer or Virgil as an author of an epic poem. He used his great classical and Biblical learning as a tool to write a master-piece like 'Paradise Lost' to “justify the ways of God to man.”

"I may assert Eternal Providence, and justify the ways of God to man."

Milton’s 'Paradise Lost' is no doubt, a narrative poem of human actions with a wider scope and large significance because it deals with the whole human race. Let’s try to discover all elements of epic regarding 'Paradise Lost'.

The first essential feature of an epic is that it is of wider and universal scope. It has national importance or significance. Homer in Iliad showed national life, thought and culture of the Greeks. Virgil in Aeneid revealed the hopes and aspiration of the Romans. Like these 'Paradise Lost' has also a lofty theme with universal appeal to all human beings. The fall of man is the theme of this epic. It means Milton not only follows all the characteristic features of the epics of Homer and Virgil but also modifies and ennobles his epic by giving it a Christian view.

"Of the man's first disobedience and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world, and all our woe."

W.J. Long keeping in view the theme of the poem comments: “Paradise Lost is a classical epic not of a man or a hero but the whole race of man.”

Secondly, traditionally an epic has an ancient and great subject taken from the legend and history. The subject and action of Milton's epic is is greater than Homer's Iliad and Virgil's Aenied because its subject belongs to the whole human race and action also meets the demands of an action recommended by Aristotle.
Third important feature of an epic is "The invocation to the Muse". This invocation is made to inspire and bless the poet to complete his task properly. Milton also uses this invocation and seeks aid of the Heavenly Muse i.e., the Holy Spirit.

"And Chiefly thou, O spirit dost prefer
Before all temples the upright heart and pure,
Instruct me, for thou know'st."

Fourth salient feature of an epic is that all the characters must have dignity and variety. In ‘Paradise Lost,’ we come across human as well as superhuman characters. Adam and Eve are human characters, whereas God, Christ and Satan are the superhuman characters.

Fifthly, an epic must have a hero with great qualities because we cannot imagine an epic without a heroic figure. Although it is very difficult to point out the hero of ‘Paradise Lost’, it has great heroic figures like God, Satan and Adam. Different critics differ sharply in their opinion. We can say that it has indeed ‘no hero’ for it is only a quibble to insist that Satan is the hero. However, one thing is worth mentioning and that is a point to be noted that a great figure may have heroic qualities without being the hero of a story.

Sixthly, an epic can never be without a serious moral lesson. The theme of Milton’s poem is to indicate the ways of God to man, to show the reasonableness of religion and the need of obedience to the “Divine Law.”

Seventhly, remarkable feature of a classical epic is that its language is sublime and above the common parlance. Milton follows Aristotle’s views about sublime style and gives the air of grandeur to his epic. How beautifully and skillfully Milton presents an allusion from astronomy science to elaborate the size of Satan’s shield!

“Like the moon, whose orb
Through Optic Glass the Tuscan artist views
At evening, from the top of Fesole.”

Eighth remarkable feature of a classical epic is the use of supernatural machinery. Milton’s characters are both human and super-human. The supernatural powers play a vital role in allotting the fate of Satan and his followers as well as Adam and Eve.

Milton's poem is no doubt, a classical epic. But the defects pointed out by the critics can never be overlooked. Its first major defect is the use of allegorical fables and the use of technical terms as we see in the description of Pandemonium. Dryden also opines that the main theme of the poem is not war but the tale of man's loss of his happiness. Like other epics, it does not end happily and contains only two Roman characters, the others being heavenly machinery.
But I think these objections are needless and unnecessary because it is not necessary for an epic to have war as its theme. Similarly, it is not necessary for an epic to have a happy end. In so far as third objection is concerned, it is rejected by Addison. He says that though the number of characters in the poem is not great, each of the characters is presented in more than one respect.

To sum up, we can say that in "Paradise Lost", Milton has used all the epic devices he found in classical epics. It possesses all the essential characteristics that Aristotle demanded for an epic poem. We fully agree with the remarks of C.M. Bowra who says, "In 'Paradise Lost' we find all the features of epic with lofty and exalted style."