



## TENNYSON'S IDEA OF A FEMALE UNIVERSITY IN HIS *THE PRINCESS*: A BRIEF ANALYSIS.

A. Vanathi

Ph.D Scholar (Part-Time), Department of English & Comparative Literature, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai .

### Abstract

This paper beautifully examines Tennyson's idea of a female University as formulated in his *The Princess* and in fact it brings out the fact that Tennyson is a committed writer coming out of his shell of reserve not only to present the woman's case but also to suggest some practical solutions by which he medley brings forth every aspect of the woman question. It also throws light upon the educational reform depicted in *The Princess* with fantastic circumstances of romantic adventure and as presented scope for artistic sketches of situations and costumes by the substitution of woman for men everywhere in the framework of college life and disciplined academic pursuits.

Truly speaking, ever since her creation, woman has been interesting and intriguing mankind. All human activity began with Eve's transgression and the consequent fall of man. Woman's beautiful appearance and graceful movement have been created to suit the basic purpose of her existence for being a wife and mother. This view was upheld as long as religion dominated over science till the Victorian period. Thus, for centuries, women have been considered secondary persons in the household. Since prehistoric times, man has been playing a dominant role at home and in society. For centuries, among civilized communities as well as among tribals, merciless treatment was meted out to women.

Woman has been a wife, a mother, a labourer, a house wife, a business executive, a teacher or a volunteer in various societies throughout history. Every society has evolved some definite ideas of the proper position and activities of women. Women were honoured in some societies while in others, they were considered less important than men. A change has recently taken place. Today, in the United States, Canada and most European countries, women are able to decide about what they will do with their lives. They have started increasingly challenging the society's traditional image of what a woman may choose to be. The place of woman has been determined to a great extent by her physical aspect namely by motherhood. The job of caring for the child has confined woman to the house. From the earliest times, motherhood has helped in bringing about a division of tasks between men and women. The nature of jobs pursued by them gave rise to inequalities, particularly in advanced societies. Woman's physical inferiority and society's traditional belief have together determined the roles of women.

Gentleness, meekness and motherliness are considered by Western countries as feminine qualities while aggressiveness and bravery are held as masculine traits. Under the influence of the Biblical fact that woman was created out of man's rib, people believed in man's superiority. And they thought that God created woman solely for his pleasure and slavish service to him. In the early days of Islam, women were compelled to live in harems. Even today, they have to wear veils but in the age of chivalry and romance, there was the affected worship of womanhood. The incongruity between the romantic dream and harsh reality is well brought out by Hugh Walker:

"The woman of romance was a queen of love and beauty and the Knight of romance was to worship her and right her wrongs. The man of reality led a more mundane and prosaic existence. The woman of reality was a being of no political power and very little power of any sort" (P378)

only the French revolution and the Industrial Revolution changed the social status of woman and man's attitude towards them. The growth of the factory system and of capitalist agriculture in England involved a number of changes in the employment of women which altered the conditions of family life and therefore in the long run affected the relation of the sexes. Only by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, members of the leisured class like the Bronte sisters and Florence Nightingale began to feel independent and significant. The early Victorians paid attention for female perfection and identity. No doubt, the challenging women started enlarging the patronage of art and literature. Educated women like Jane Austen, Maria Edgeworth and Hannahmore became authors and artists. In fiction, Dickens exhibits a veritable portrait gallery of masterful wives: Mrs. Willfur, Mrs. Joe Gargery, Mrs. Squeers, Mrs. Bumble, Mrs. Mc Stinger" are hardly the types one would take of poor defenceless creatures... Even Heathcliff... had his peer in the first Catherine"

Gradually women developed the courage to face the challenges in life, art and literature. The independence and self-assertiveness shown by women in all walks of life brought home the point that "their earlier failure to enter the outer world was not because of the force of convention but lack of opportunity now in the nineteenth century, their superiority in number provided them with strong ground for the claim and they accepted the opportunities of business life as the domestic sphere



was not open to them at all” (James 343). English women are greatly indebted to John Stewart Mill and Matthew Arnold. John Stewart Mill in his **Subjection of Women** (1869), he expressed his idea about the social emancipation of woman and attacked the bondage of convention and proclaimed the rights of individual men and women to free life and thought” (Trevelyan 522). The 19<sup>th</sup> century was remarkable for two things: Queen Victoria and Tennyson. Tennyson began to grant due importance to women by creating a number of heroines in his poetry. He was preoccupied with matters connected purely with women. His **The Princess** in fact, brings out the truth that Tennyson is a ‘committed writer coming out of his shell of reserve not only to present the woman’s case but also to suggest some practical solutions. This medley brings forth every aspect of the woman question. Here he does vehemently condemn the long suppression of woman’s physical, intellectual and spiritual development as a consequence of male domination. In **Locksley Hall**, Tennyson makes his hero, in his angry, cry

“Weakness to be worth with weakness woman’s  
pleasure,  
woman’s pain –  
Nuture made them blinder motions bounded  
in a shallower brain  
woman is the lesser man”

It appears as if the woman’s question had already occupied his mind. It continued to dwell with him. The subject is introduced in the prologue to **The Princess**. A story is read of a feudal heroine of Sir Walter’s house, who rather than yield to the wild will of a king, takes arms and conquers him, “Where lives, asks one, “such a woman now?” And Lillia, Sir Walter’s daughter, replies:

“There are thousand now  
Such women, but convention beats them down  
It is but bringing up; no more than that  
you men have done it; how I hate you all O I wish  
That I were some great princes, I would build  
Far off from men a college like a man’s  
And I would teach them all that men are taught:  
We are twice as quick!  
But I would make it death  
For any male thing but to peep at us” (Brooke 167)

The whole question is there laid down; and out of Lilia’s wish grows the tale. Her view is the same as that of Ida, the Princess. When Ida, however, is young, she dreams that man is equal to woman, but that each is the half of the other that each fulfils the defect in each and that together they become the perfect being. this is the view of the Prince at the end of the book and Ida says the dream was once hers. But Princess Ida by whom the “woman question” is raised in **The Princess** is of an entirely different caliber. The hybrid mixture of the modern idea and the mediaeval story results in the poem hovering between jest and earnest. Also he does not know how to regard his own “sweet girl graduates”

Tennyson was aware of the inequalities and sufferings experienced by women for centuries. He had been preoccupied with the woman question in his poem “The Princess”. To understand his conception of a University exclusively for women and the nature of men and women taking part in it, it seems necessary to make thorough study of this long medley. The sphere of women in society has been a burning question. Though exalted, her position in the age of chivalry was an unnatural one. **The Paston Letters** gives us a vivid picture of woman’s limited and dependent condition during the fifteenth century. The Renaissance benefitted woman of nobility to some extent. The opportunity it afforded for culture was taken full advantage of by such ladies as Lady Jany Grey, Sir Thomas More’s daughters and Queen Elizabeth. But the mass of women remained ignorant. Later, when women themselves began to feel that their sphere of action should be extended; there were far-sighted men who thought with them. In 1693, Defoe pleaded for more general education for women. In his “Essay upon projects – An Academy for Women”, he writes, that one of the most barborous customs in the world is the denial to them of this advantage. Addison and Steele advocated the cause of women in **The Spectator**, **The Tatler** and **The Guardian**. As Sir Alfred Lyall puts it, “Tennyson had been long meditating upon the woman question. Philosophically discussed since Rousseau’s day and touched upon by Bentham and James Mill, it had never come within the sphere of practical English politics. The outcome in 1847 was his poem **The Princess**” (P46).

**The Princess** enshrines “the woman’s question as it appeared in the mid-nineteenth century. Considering all that has been done since then, it is a prophetic utterance” writes stopford Brooke. Much is suggested under a mock-heroic mark, but it has



been put into practical form. “Moreover, he has touched with grace and clearance, a number of phases of opinion which now prevail; embodying each phase in one of his characters. The woman’s question ones a great deal to **The Princess**” (P152). The narrator of **The Princess** and his friends were on a visit to Sir Walter Vivian’s palace. There he came across a Guide Book in which he read the story of a heroic lady, who; while defending her fort and her modesty destroyed the entire force of the kind. At the Gothic ruins, they met Aunt Elizabeth, Lilia and some ladies from the neighboring countries. When the narrator was reading about the heroic lady, Walter asked Lilia where they could find such a woman then. Lilia assured them that there were many. Lilia wanted to know what sort of stories men narrated among themselves. The seven men answered her by narrating their story in turn. Walter’s aunt wanted the narrator to begin the tale representing himself as the hero. Walter suggested that Lilia should be the heroine, tall, grand and homicidal like the epic heroines and it was for the prince to win her. The surroundings were suitable for the narration of the medley. The ladies were to sing a song between the narrations.

The prince was like a girl, fair and curly haired. His blue eyes suggested that he was given to dreaming. At the tender age of eight, he was betrothed to a neighbouring princess, the daughter of king Gama. From time to time, he received news about her prosperity and the powers of her brothers. He wore a locket containing a lock of her dark hair and her picture. When the time came for marriage, the King’s messengers came back from Gama to say that the compact could not be honoured because the Princess had decided to live alone among her women. The angry king rejected the Prince’s offer to meet Gama. Instead, he threatened to invade Gama’s country and bring the princess by force so the prince and his friends decided to meet Gama secretly. Florian had a sister there. A mysterious voice told him that he should follow the plan until he succeeded.

Gama feated for three days but confessed his helplessness. Ida had been influenced by two women into founding a university for maidens. He said that the Prince did not stand a chance to meet the Princess as no man was allowed inside the University. However, armed with the father’s letters, the friends ventured on their plan. They came to an inn in a rustic town on the borders of Gama’s Kingdom. Gama’s fears were confirmed by the inn-keeper. Suddenly the prince had an idea. He remembered that he and his friends used to masquerade as girls at the parties in his father’s court. Dressed like maidens, the three friends reached the university at midnight. A lady collected their horses and another took them to the office. Hearing that Lady Psyche was the prettiest and best-natured, they enrolled themselves as her pupils. Dressed in colourful academic robes, they entered the awesome presence of the Princess. There were statues of the muses and goddesses everywhere. Princess Ida sat among her papers and huge volumes of books. A leopard crouched on either side. An embodiment of female beauty, her entire being and bright eyes radiated power and grace. When reference was made to the court from which they had come, she asked them if they knew the prince. The prince said that he worshipped her. She said that she did not think of the prince at all. She advised them no to marry but to learn how to cast away the tricks of men who had made toys of them. Even if they married later on, it must be on equal footing.

The statutes of the University were rigorous; they must not correspond with home for three years; they should not cross the liberties, and never see or speak with any man. The princess asked them to emulate the gallant deeds of those women whose statues adorned the Hall. That lady psyche briefed the new-comers. She traced the history of woman and explained how she had been persecuted. The princess changed all that. The inmates of at the University were taught all the subjects which were hitherto learnt by me. She referred to many able and heroic women like Queen Elizabeth, Joan of Arc and Sappho. Psyche also prophesied the future. The reported lecture of psyche combined suggestions of a tub-thumping party speech, a lecture in a survey course and a reporter’s mangled account of a public address.

All on a sudden, Psyche recognized her brother and drew their attention to the warning at the entrance, “Let No man Enter in on Pain of Death” she told them that her row compelled her to report the presence of the man. Then the prince told her the reason for their trespass. Nothing, not even her brother Florian’s pleadings could soften her. In the end, they managed to gain time to slip away. She said she could explain to the princess that the three barbarous maidens could not learn anything and so disappeared.

Florian and his sister Psyche were exchanging news about their family. Their talk was interrupted by Melissa, Lady Blanche’s daughter. The girl had been overhearing their conversation about the real identity of the three men. Psyche pleaded with her not to reveal the matter to the princess and the girl promised. Cyril had fallen in love with psyche. He fondled and amused the Lady’s baby. The day was spent in listening to lectures on every subject on earth. The princess attention was centered round the princess who sat among her professors discussing various subjects. After dinner, the church bells rang and a service began. Psalms and litanies written by Ida were sung. The morning brought bad news. Melissa’s mother had declared that the three maidens looked like man, melisa had blushed and thereby revealed the truth. This discovery had given



her a good weapon to dethrone Lady Psyche from her exalted position. She had immediately rushed to the princess. Melissa said that there was still time for them to escape. In the meantime, Florian had fallen in love with Melissa.

Cyril had a meeting with Lady Blanche to pacify her. Telling her the truth about the prince's and princess's compact failed to move her. Then Cyril reminded her that if the three men were punished, the consequences would be grave. Wars would be fought, and that would harm the woman's cause. Finally Cyril appealed to her womanly weakness of jealousy. Though she had been the authentic foundress of the college, she was enjoying only the second place, some said, the third place. If she helped the prince to get the princess as his rightful bride and winked at their advent, they would reward her. When they returned to their land, she would be enthroned among the women as their head. Lady Branche promised to think over this and give her answer a little later. Thus, they gained some more time.

Thus, the *u*, is "a beautiful serio-comic love-story, that has been treated over seriously not only by those who dislike playing with a subject which is for them a matter of hard and earnest argument, but also by others to whom the poem is the herald melody of the higher education of women" (Lyll 37). The logical conclusion from the denouement is that matrimony is better for women than a life exclusively devoted to the superintendence of a sort of nunnery in which girls are to be trained and fitted to cast off the yoke of man's pretensions to superiority. Nor indeed was the college projected by the princess as an alternative or antidote to marriage, but only in order that if afterwards they chose to wed, they might do so on equal terms of intellectual companionship" (P47). This noble project of educational reform is surrounded with fantastic circumstances of romantic adventure and is presented scope for artistic sketches of novel situations and costumes by the substitution of women for men everywhere in the framework of college life and discipline.

#### **References**

- a. Brooke, Stopford, A. Tennyson: His Art and Relation to Modern life London: Ibister & Co, 1902.
- b. James, Barlett Burleigh. Women: In All ages and in centuries, women of England Philadelphia: The Rittonhouse Press, 1970.
- c. Lyall, Sir Alfred Tennyson: The Princess and in Memoriam London: Macmillan & Co, 1898.
- d. Stratford, Esme Wingfield. "The Victorian Woman" The Victorian Tragedy London: George Routledge and sons Ltd, 1930.
- e. Traveyan, George Macaulay. A History of England London: Longmans Green & Co, 1976.
- f. Walker, Hugh. The Literature of the Victorian Era Connecticut: Lawrence Verry Inc, 1900.