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Myths and Legends in the Literary Works of Lord Alfred Tennyson

*–Jamal Ahmad**

Abstract

Lord Tennyson, the leading Victorian poet of English literature is hailed today not only a representative poet delineating the doubt and dilemma of his age, but also a great poetic figure who has discussed extensively the myths and legends of the past in most of his poems. He is very much successful in including Greek and Roman mythology as the basis of his poetry. His purpose is to give some universal philosophies through the speeches of his characters. Hence we find both mythology and philosophy in his poetry simultaneously.

Keywords: Myths, Legends, Philosophy, Classical poem, Concept of womanhood.

Tennyson's love for the past is visible in his poetry of adolescence. Between his eleventh and fourteenth year he translated the first ninety three lines of Claudian's "De Raptu Proserpine". He wrote a number of poems on the mythological themes and old English legends. Through these myths Tennyson found an objective basis for personal expression. His happiest use of myths or legends generally involved a reinterpretation of their original significance in terms of some private and highly personal insight. Once he said, "when I write an antique.I must put it into a frame something modern about it. It is no use giving a mere reshuffle of old legends" (Tennyson 13).

"The Sea-Fairies" published in 1832, is about Ulysses and his crew sailing past, the island of the Sirens on their way to Ithaca. The source of this poem is drawn from Odyssey and is also influenced by Croker's Fairy Legends. The poem begins with the song of the Sea-Fairies. Tennyson from the beginning, despites the tussle between the will power of the sailors to resist and the wiles of the Sea-Fairies to entice with their 'shrill music' which reaches the 'weary mariners' in the middle of the sea as they

* *Lecturer in English, Department of English Language and Literature, College of Science and Humanities, Al Sulayyil, Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, P.O. Box: 339, Al Sulayyil- 11913, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.*
Email: jamal_hsdp@yahoo.co.in

muse, 'Whispering to each other half in fear' (I.5). The poet provides through them beautiful images of a remote and romantic world.

The Sirens in "The Sea-Fairies" are quite different from that of Homer. Tennyson's 'Sea-Fairies' are "innocent creatures, almost angels in appearance who invite not to sin, but to a carefree holiday". But Homer's Sirens, with their tricky mesmerizing tunes, enchant the mariners on the high seas and once they have the unsuspecting sailors on their shore they kill them. Tennyson changes Homer's seductress Sirens into "Sea-Fairies" who, with their flirtatious song, offer a carefree life to the mariners.

The sharp clear twang of the golden chords somehow fails in stopping the sailors. The mariners who are resisting the temptation of the green isles in "The Sea-Fairies" willingly land on the Lotos-Isle in "The Lotos-Eaters" (1832). This poem is drawn from Homer's Odyssey. Tennyson takes a classical story and adapts it to represent a mood of the modern mind—the tendency to lose, in dreaming, all touches with the actualities of life. The weary mariners, sailing home to Ithaca, from the Trojan War, come to the island of the Lotos plant. Drugged into inaction by eating the plant, they sing together a choric song of sorrow and pain that come with toil and the joy they had in that magic languor. The dominant tone is elegiac (Daiches 998).

Tennyson has given a beautiful landscape to his classical poem which is put into harmony with the soft oblivion which the lotos brings, so the air is languid, the moon full faced, the sheets of foam of the streams slumberous. Even the snow on the peaks is old, the amber light dreams and the waves curve tenderly upon the land and the leaf and apple upon the trees ripen to fullness and fall. Thus nature too seems to have eaten the lotus. Even the end of the poem expressing the Epicurean conception of the gods—brings Olympus down into harmony with the indolent, indifferent lotus eaters.

The tired sailors step on the island and completely surrender to the pleasure of the fruit. "The Sea-Fairies" and "The Lotus-Eaters" appear to be not just modern reconstructions of certain situations from a wider canvas of Greek mythology; they are poems of escape from the demands of a world of reality into a world of art, of losing oneself in art.

The lotus land does not offer life but spiritual death and Tennyson has taken pains to depict it as a waste land where these men live in a trance 'with tired eyes', their voices thin like 'voices from the grave", (1,34) completely cut off from family and country. Their past has become a heap of broken images only dimly remembered. Thus in "The Lotos-Eaters" Tennyson has expressed the hollowness of the claims of 'Nirvana'. Retreat into dream world is unable to give the desired peace and contentment. The weary mariners resolve to remain in the lotus land to lead a life of inaction.

Thus the "desire for escape is there but the poet is aware of the dangers of such a state of mind" (Tennyson 160) by abandoning practical responsibilities the lotos eaters lose the sympathy of the poet. They can only muse, brood and live in memory.

"The Sea-Fairies", "The Lotos Eaters" and "The Hesperidins" may be regarded as poems of different versions of the Muses and their homes. The lotos eaters, comparing themselves to the mythical gods, become indifferent to the travails of making. They

enjoy the privileges—such as the music of the Muses that are the sole domain of the gods. To the lotos eaters the lotos Island appears a celestial adobe.

The sea in "The Lotos-Eaters" is violent. The sea symbolizes life. The mariners signify the poet sailing on the sea of life. Their reaction to the floating towards them from the shore is a symbolic depiction of the gradual change in the poet's attitude towards art. In "The Sea-Fairies" he resists the agnatic attraction of the world of art under the influence of the Apostles, while in "The Lotos-Eaters" he willingly submits to art.

If "The Sea-Fairies" and "The Lotos-Eaters" are about the strong attraction of art, "The Hesperides" is an attempt to understand and explicate it. "The Hesperides" strikes Tennyson's recurrent note of longing for a vanished or unattainable paradise and explores the persistent theme of the inhuman fascination of isolation and retreat. The poem was first published in the volume of 1832 and then, for reasons never given, was suppressed by Tennyson. It was first reprinted by Hallam Tennyson.

The 'East' and 'West' had a special significance for Tennyson. The golden apple has the virtue of being the treasure of the west. Tennyson connects the west with images of the sea, of growth and paradoxically of death. The antithesis to this condition he conceived as the land of dawn, bold and strong, full of activity and strife-the world of everyday life which is always plotting to steal the magic fruit. Tennyson's motto in associating the song of Hesperides with the sacred fruit connotes a connection among the artist, his art and his inspiration. Stange makes an important statement with regard to this poem. He writes:

> …in a sense Tennyson's will remained divided. In his more popular work there is an attempt either to suppress his conflicting desires for social engagement and for the life of art, or to resolve his conflict in favour of "the whole life" – to treat the withdrawal to a palace of art or to a lotos-land as an aberration…of what the people's poet came to feel was the devil's side in this continuing debate (732-743).

The song of the 'Sea Fairies' is an invitation to the mariners for a carefree life. While in "The Sea Fairies' the tempters resist the temptation, in "The Lotos-Eaters" the mariners themselves sing this song emphasizing forgetfulness. Thus the first two poems of this group stand for an escape. In the third choric song, which is sung by the three sisters, we have the theme of isolation and selfishness. The apple is to be protected so that Hercules should not steal it for the sake of humanity. Thus selfishness or escape from reality is the themes of the three choric songs, which form a part of Tennyson's early poetic career. In fact, all the poems of this period (1830 & 1832) are concerned with isolation and escape.

The poems comprising the second group reflect the poet's own concept of womanhood. The salient features of these poems are that they are not about maidens, consumed with passion of love, but are wives who are victims of infidelity, thoughtless overindulgence, or some intrigue of their husbands.

Tennyson was greatly influenced by his mother. The image of his mother as a 'remarkable saintly woman' projected in "Isabel", continues to be a model for his other women based poems. The impact of the woman who "devoted herself entirely to her children"[5] (Tennyson: *A Memoir*: I 17-18) was stronger on him. Tennyson himself feels: "the world hath not another (though all her fairest forms are types of thee. And thou of God in thy great charity)./Of such a finished chastened purity" ("Isabel", II.38-41). "Hero to Leander", "Oenone", "Semele", "The Death of Oenone" are poems the prevailing factor of poems. They depict the agonies of women.

Tennyson through Oenone's child tries to highlight the concept of womanhood and marriage. (*Tennyson*: *Christopher Ricks* 65) Oenone stays in the 'wooden Ida' to pine for her past life and desires to 'talk with the wild Cassandra, who had prophesied great discord and war. As an aggrieved wife she thinks of only one option, i.e. death. Oenone's taking just one option that of suicide is in a way an upholding of the institution of marriage. Tennyson has changed the story to the needs of the modern times. He points out that the foundation of character, of life, of Government, of true power, of the glory and strength of a country lies in 'self-reverence', 'self-knowledge', 'self-control'. Paris stands for a man wavering between the various values of life or ideals which he is going to follow. Hera stands for power, Athena for wisdom and Aphrodite for sensuous pleasures and physical beauty. There are three broad types of men—those who run after power, those who seek knowledge and wisdom in life; and those who indulge in pleasure of the physical senses. Tennyson favours moral law which asks a man to know and do the right with fear of consequences. Paris opts sensuous pleasure and this course brings disaster to Paris, to Oenone and to Troy, Tennyson takes up the subject of Oenone once again, after a lapse of about fifty years, in "The Death of Oenone".

Tennyson slightly deviates from the Greek myth in showing Oenone's immolation. Quintus Calabar's Oenone, without uttering a word, muffles up her face with her mantle and springs quickly into the fire. Tennyson's Oenone does the same, but it is significant that she utters the word 'husband' as she leaps on to the flaming pyre and 'mixes' herself with him and 'passes in fire' (I.106).

Tennyson's handling of the same theme was to uphold the institution of marriage. "The upholders of a mantel bond between Paris and Cenone were Ovid and Quintus Smymeus; Marriage it would appear was not a purely Victorian or Tennysonian invention" (Bush 222-23).

Tennyson's mythical poems on women reflect two personalities of a woman—motherhood and wifehood. Oenone, though the betrayed and aggrieved wife fights up till her death in upholding the institution of marriage. Semele, the simple woman and mother rejoices at her children's future attainments.

Like "Semele" and "Oneone", "Demeter and Persephone" too is a poem about a woman, a mother, who wanders anxiously for her stolen daughter. Demeter is an aggrieved mother whose husband himself is responsible for the abduction of their daughter. The poem was published by the poet when he was alone octogenarian. His

brother Charles who resembled him so much in spirit, his son Lionel and many of his best friends were dead. The poet was aware of his own approaching end.

Tennyson considered Demeter one of the most beautiful types of womanhood. Through this myth the poet has expressed the mysteries of love and life, earth and human destiny. The poem pictures a heart-rending scene of a mother, searching for her daughter over hills and dales. Demeter is in her daughter's loving embrace as she listens to her tale of woe after she (Persephone) had been kidnapped by Aidoneus. Finding that her mother is still afraid of the 'black blur' of earth left by the closing chasm through which she had been abducted, she touches the spot lightly with her foot, and it is covered with flowers like the rest of the field. Till line 125 the poem is a strongly emotional account of the grieving mother's search for her lost daughter. Here the poem could have ended. Demeter, having temporarily regained her daughter, once again blesses the fields; the rhythmic seasonal alternation of death and birth can begin. But probably, thinking of the very recent loss of his son Lionel, Tennyson is unsatisfied by the simple pagan narrative.

Thus Tennyson's Greek mythical heroines are solitary female figures. The lonely female for the poet is the symbol of his aesthetic self and the unconscious mind. Through all these solitary figures Tennyson is projecting his own unconscious mind.

The poems like 'Ulysses", "Tithonus" and "Tiresias" may be grouped as poems with Greek mythical heroes as protagonists. These poems stemmed from Tennyson's soulful cogitations on the loss of his friend Arthur Hallam. Hallam died on Sept. 15, 1833, at Vienna, and the news of his death reached Somersby on October 1833. "Ulysses" was composed soon after Tennyson got the news of Hallam's death and the other two were also, initially, composed round about the same period, i.e. 1833. But "Ulysses" was first published in 1842, "Tithonus" in 1860 and "Tiresias" in 1885.

Tennyson depicts the conflict between Tiresias and the general public of Thebes, as well as within the psyche of the sage himself, between his handicap of blindness, old age, and hence his helplessness on the one hand and his desire to serve his country on the other. It is in the theme of Menoceceus sacrifice that "Tiresias" can be regarded as a complement to "Ulysses" and "Tithonus".

The multifaceted, Greek mythical poems can be treated as the poet's objective correlative(s) for braving the struggle of life. The prolonged inner struggle of the poet, "to be or not to be" is recorded in them.

Apart from the classic myths Tennyson had been strongly attracted towards the Arthurian legends too. He, as a boy had read the Arthurian legend and worshipped Arthur as a hero. A proof of which is the two early versions— "The Epic" or "Morte Darthur" and "Sir Galahad". However, the appearance of the legend first came in verse in "The Lady of Shallot" (1832). He kept on working, expanding, re-shaping and re-arranging the legends for more than half a century. It was only in 1855, that he could give a final shape to his idylls.

Tennyson through his imagination weaves into the stories a certain aspect or spirit of modern thought. The world of castles, brave and chivalrous knights, fair

ladies, quests and enchantments offers an irresistible, contrast to the urban materialism, struggle for wealth and spiritual doubts that oppress the Victorian conscience. The poem proceeds seasonally from spring in "The Coming of Arthur" to winter in "The Passing of Arthur" which represents the rise and fall of a civilization, in which corruption prevails. This decline is caused by passion.

A survey of all the mythical and legendary poems of Tennyson shows that the poet often chose those themes, which were not fully developed. Only with such themes he could have full play of his imagination and could show the modem relevance of these old myths. Thus Tennyson turned to the Greeks not for the sake of beauty of Greece alone but also for the sake of ethical power of these stories. He did not just try to find a refuge in ancient times but brought the thought of the past to brighten the present. Nevertheless, the didactic note in these poems has not overshadowed their artistic beauty. In this way, Tennyson has brought a harmonious balance between the ethical and the aesthetic aspects of these poems. He expresses both their sensuous beauty as well as their universal lesson. Tennyson not only improved but increased the significance of the classical poems he wrote. In his hands these myths are the vehicle to express his personal convictions, his doubts and his beliefs.

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