



Lady of Shallot: Women's Autonomy, Quest for Identity and Death in Defiance

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ABSTRACT :

Alfred Lord Tennyson's "*Lady of Shalott*" explores the Beliefs central to feminism that is the quest for identity, self discovery, autonomy in the Victorian times. This article also delves into the connection of Plato's "*Allegory of Cave*" with the lady of Shalott's confinement in the tower and how the death of Lady at the end of the poem explore the Edgar Allan Poe's concept of the "*Death of a beautiful women*" as one of the major theme. Tennyson in the poem "*Lady of Shalott*" tells the story of a mysterious woman who is cursed and confined in a tower on the island of Shallot and is forbidden to look outside her window. Her only medium to connect with the outside world is through the mirror. Tennyson's portrayal of this Lady emphasises the fact that solitude, repression and anonymity compulse one to transgress their physical and psychological boundaries in order to gain individuality, freedom and identity in the world of strict social hierarchies.

Keywords : Allegory of Cave, Death of a beautiful woman, Identity, self discovery, autonomy, freedom, individuality

About the poet :

Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) was a prominent English poet born in Somersby Lincolnshire, England in 1809 . His work explores a wide range of themes reflecting his personal experiences and his views on Victorian society. He explored the themes of love, nature, morality etc. His writing prowess gained him popularity among the Victorian readers. In 1884 , Tennyson accepted a peerage and became Alfred Lord Tennyson. In 1850 he became the poet Laureate of the United Kingdom. Some of the most famous poems of Tennyson include "*In Memoriam*" (an elegy which he wrote for his friend Arthur Hellem,) "*Charge on the light Brigade*" , "*Ulysses*" is one of his main poems , "*Lady of Shalott*" etc.

About the poem :

The Lady of Shallot is a narrative poem about a mysterious woman who is cursed and confined in a tower on the island of Shalott. She is forbidden to look outside the window and her only medium to connect with the world is through the window of her tower. She weaves whatever she sees as a reflection of the world on the mirror and her curse befalls her when she gazes upon the knight Lancelot through her window. She transcends her boundaries and floats across the river to Camelot and dies in her boat near the city of Camelot and meets her tragic fate. The poem deals with the themes of isolation, creativity, fate, desire for love and freedom , death and Victorian societal norms.

Plato's Cave and Tower of Shalott :

As in Plato's "*Republic*" (Book VII) the concept of Allegory of Cave which is a powerful metaphor that explores the nature of reality and quest for freedom can directly be linked to the Lady of Shalott. In the Plato's concept the prisoners have lived their entire lives from birth chained inside a cave and are unable to move their heads and are forced to face the blank wall forever, similarly the Lady of Shalott was also cursed to be confined in a tower forever. She was also forbidden to look outside her window to the outside world. Her only way to look at the world was through the mirror in which she can only see the reflection of the real world which was cast on the mirror. In the same way the prisoners of Plato's cave saw only the shadows cast on the wall by the reflection of the fire burning behind them. As both the prisoners and Lady of Shalott believed that the reflections and shadows of the world which they were able to see were the actual reality of the world as they knew nothing else. The Lady of Shalott just like one of the prisoners of the cave of Plato transgresses the limited boundaries to discover the whole new world and knowledge outside that they were previously unaware of. Once they got out they realized both the lady of Shalott and the prisoner of the cave that the outside world is so much more real than that in the cave or tower.

Theme of “ Death of a Beautiful woman ” :

As Edgar Allen Poe states in “ *The philosophy of composition* ” (1846) he believes that “ *The death, then of a beautiful woman is unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world* ” . He resonates death and melancholia together because the death of an ideal subject of beauty evokes the deepest sentiments of human emotions and in “ *The Lady of Shalott* ” by Tennyson the death of Lady at the end of the poem ties deeply with the theme of death of a beautiful woman by Poe. Beautiful women are considered to be the symbol of purity, perfection and nature. In the last lines of the poem

“ All the knights at Camelot :

But Lancelot mused a little space; He said “ She has a lovely face ; God in his mercy lend her grace The lady of Shalott ”

These lines clearly show how she was seen just as an object of beauty by the people of Camelot. This reflects on the belief on how women in Victorian times were only seen as symbols of beauty and purity and not as an individual being with prowess and creativity. They were unacknowledged and unseen just like the lady of Shalott. Her death at the end of the poem makes the whole poem gloomy and tragic yet very mystical and timeless with enchanted dream-like setting and incidents adding more grimness in the tale.

Social limitations on Victorian women :

Victorian age was the period of emerging industrialization, scientific invention, political and cultural transformation. It was also called the second English Renaissance but for women this age was marked with strict societal expectations, gender roles. Women were expected to be domestic and submissive. They were seen only as the ideal of virtue and purity. Their freedom was limited. Their identities were only confined to their fathers and husbands that is the reason why many Victorian women writers concealed their identities and opted for anonymity for example George Elliot, Bronte sisters (Currer Bell, Acton Bell, Ellis Bell) . They did so in order to gain wider acceptance and readers in the patriarchal standards of society.

In the poem “ *Lady of Shalott* ” we can see the lady of shalott as an embodiment of all the Victorian women. She was cursed for unknown reasons and was confined in a tower . The tower becomes the metaphor for the four walls of a house where the Victorian women were confined by the male dominated society to work just as a house maker or an angel of the house. Lady of Shalott was forbidden to look outside her window and can only have the glance of the world through the mirror. It clearly indicates how women in Victorian times were deprived of their freedom and individuality.

“ But who hath seen her wave her hand? Or at the casement seen her stand?

Or is she known in all her land The Lady of Shalott ”

No one on the island knew about the Lady of Shalott. Her identity was anonymous, unknown as she was not an animate entity. Apart from being just a woman , Lady of Shalott was creative and artistic. She weaved the tapestry by the prowess of her imagination. It was her only way of expressing freedom through her art.

“ There she weaves by night and day A magic web with colour gay ”

Throughout history women have transgressed when their yearning for identity and freedom has subjugated. The lady of Shalott also transcends both the physical and psychological social barriers of the Victorian norms and looked outside the window to knight Lancelot. She knew she was cursed and if she transgresses ,the curse will fall on her but her desire for seeking individuality, self discovery and liberty, she transgressed the societal norms.

“ She left the web, she left the loom, She made three paces thro’ the room She saw the water lily bloom

She saw the helmet and the plume She look'd down to Camelot

Out flow the web and floated wide The mirror crack'd from side to side The curse is come upon me, cried The lady of Shalott ”

One of the main focus of the poem is that although the title says the poem is about the “ *Lady of Shalott* ” but in the most parts of the poem sir Lancelot description is more than that of the lady of Shalott which also indicates the rigid gender Hierarchies in Victorian times that placed men above women.

In the lines “ *Out upon the wharfs they came , Knight and burgher, Lord and Dame,*

And round the prow they read her name ,

The lady of Shalott ” Tennyson shows how her quest for identity compels her to defy the social constraints placed on her and she leaves the tower in an attempt to step outside the world in order to be seen and known. She inscribed her name on the boat so that people may know her . She floats down the river to Camelot but was only identified as an object of beauty and purity by the people of Camelot. She risked her life to have an individuality that ended on a tragic death of the lady of Shalott which metaphorically represents that defiance of the rules in the Victorian times brought severe consequences. The women who went against societal norms and challenged authority by trespassing the boundaries were labeled as “ Fallen women ”.

“ Who is this? And what is here?

And in the lighted palace near But Lancelot mused a little space ;

*He said, she has a lovely face
God in his mercy lend her grace
The lady of Shalott "*

Society in Victorian times didn't see women as creative and artistic or having any skill other than making home and children. Same fate was written for the lady of Shalott. At the end of the poem she was not recognised as individual for the creativity she had done all her life by weaving the scenes of her imagination on the tapestry and the skill and the beautiful voice she had but was objectified by the patriarchal society and was gazed as a beautiful object of art and beauty meant to be just admired for her beautiful face. Her journey for self discovery and identity in the world which denies women of their freedom and liberty only brought her death. She got freedom at the end but at the cost of her own death . She was recognized as the lady of Shalott but after her death. The theme of freedom comes at the cost of lives ties deeply with the tragic loss of the lady of Shalott.

Psychological manipulation of lady of Shalott :

An alternate perspective which we can also link to the death of the lady of shalott can be psychological manipulation. In the Victorian times women were bound by societal expectations; they were given specific roles to play and were not in the power to challenge authority. In order to maintain power, authority and supremacy they subjugated the marginalized that were women. In case of Lady of Shalott may be there was not any kind of curse on her and she was just made to believe that she is cursed and cannot leave the tower it was just to control her and have full authority on her whole existence so that she can't challenge the social hierarchy and live in Submissiveness and fear throughout her life. The Victorian age was the age of reform, new technology and fascination with learning new things. Their fascination with witchcraft and occult might have given them the idea to inflict fear of curses and bad omen to control people's mind and make them do things as they wish. It can be speculated that the Lady of Shalott's death was because of psychological manipulation. Her death can be called the death by fright or death induced by fear. She transgressed and ran away but why she died and how she died is not mentioned in the poem. No physical injuries or wounds have been mentioned so it can be said that she died because of her own mental fear. She might have been thinking she is cursed and something bad will happen to her. The thought of these things caused her stress and anxiety which can be referred to as the case of Psychosomatic. It is a condition in which fear and anxiety cause harm or death rather than an external or physical cause.

Rapunzel and Lady of Shalott :

" *Rapunzel* " is a famous fairy tale which was popularized by the Brothers Grimm in their 1812 collection " *Grimm's Fairy Tales* " . The origins of Rapunzel trace back to earlier stories like " *Petrosinella* " (1634) by Giambattista Basile and other European folklore variations. Tennyson's " *Lady of Shalott* " is also written in the form of a fairy tale. It has a noble knight, magical curse, mystical atmosphere, enchanted tower , fate and moral undertones.

*" Willows whiten, aspens quiver,
Little breezes dusk and shiver
Thro' the wave that runs for ever
By the island in the river*

Flowing down to Camelot.

*Four gray walls, and four gray towers,
Overlook a space of flowers,*

*And the silent isle imbowers
The Lady of Shalott. "*

Like Rapunzel, Lady of Shalott was locked in a tower with no stairs or doors, only a window. The sorceress who locked Rapunzel in the tower metaphorically represents the Victorian society who locked women into the limited boundaries or the lady of shallot in the tower. Rapunzel fell in Love with the prince and tried to escape the tower. In " *Lady of Shalott* " the lady may have been in love with the knight Lancelot and her yearning for love made her to transgress the societal constraints . She was in isolation all her life and seeing others happy in the reflection of the mirror made her sick because she herself was longing for the partner and the love.

" And music, went to Camelot:

*Or when the moon was overhead,
Came two young lovers lately wed:*

*"I am half sick of shadows," said
The Lady of Shalott. "*

But her love was not successful for her unlike Rapunzel her unrequited love led to the loss of her life. The elements mentioned in lady of shalott shows great affinity with the tale of Rapunzel so we can say that may be Tennyson was somewhat inspired by the fairy tale of Rapunzel.

Conclusion :

The " *Lady of Shalott* " is a poem not only about unrequited love , artistic creativity and fate but it has the undertones of the condition of women in the Victorian times. Through the character of the lady of Shalott and her circumstances it is clearly indicated how women were treated in the society and how much freedom they were given to express themselves. Their identities were anonymous and they had no standard in the societal hierarchy and were subjugated by the Patriarchal system. Tennyson highlighted in the poem how defying social constraints can result in one's death but also shows how one's longing for freedom and identity can compel them to transgress and challenge societal norms.

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