

The Creativity and Redemption of Feminism

A Theological Analysis of *Beauty and the Beast* by Seok-Cheol Shin

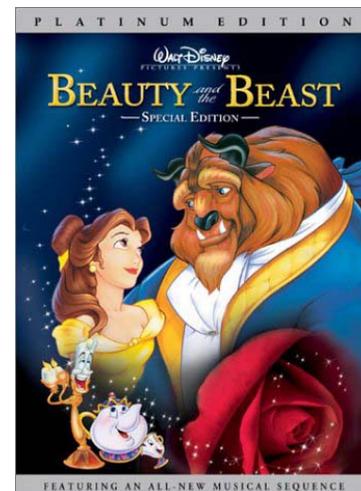
I. The Bible and the Modern Culture

Is it really true that “All Scripture is inspired by God?” (2 Ti 3:16). Some feminist theologians argue that the Bible is nothing but male-centered works that are critically tainted with androcentrism. Nevertheless, the belief that the Bible was written completely by the revelation of God has legalized that the rights of women have been oppressed by the biased Christian doctrines. Today feminist theology fights androcentrism in Scriptures and cultural institutions by challenging the male authority of the Bible. If the Reformers of the 17th century fought the corrupted tradition of Roman church, modern feminist theologians have been fighting the biased male authority of the Reformation.

In addition, we must not neglect that biased Christian traditions have controlled worldly cultures with a powerful authority throughout Christian history. Throughout this history, popular culture has taught us, consciously or unconsciously, that women are inferior to men. This is true especially in popular fairy tales. For example, the stories of *Cinderella*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, and *Sleeping Beauty* have infused into our minds stereotypical images of women who subject the value of woman to the power of man. Those fairy tales are also male-centered works tainted by androcentrism. However, the fairy tale *Beauty and the Beast* has a unique perspective that overcomes the patriarchal prejudice in the contemporary tales and reflects modern feminism. The male-centered plots cover the real value of woman in the story just as the countless male-centered terms darken the divine images of women in the Scriptures. I will examine the feminist perspective in *Beauty and the Beast*, drawing on this examination to reveal the real image of women in the Scriptures.

II. The history of *Beauty and the Beast*

Beauty and the Beast was first published in 1757 by Jeanne-Marie LePrince de Beaumont. Seemingly, the fairy tale deals with a typically conventional relationship between a muscular male hero and beautiful female heroine. Meanwhile, Walt Disney modernized the fairy tale by adapting the plot in 1991. As the most impressive achievement, the heroine in the animation has a specific name, ‘Belle’, unlike the general female noun, ‘Beauty’, the heroine in the original fairy tale. Naming the heroine indicates that the animation was influenced by modern senses that respect individual features of women. As a matter of fact, Belle is described as a model feminist who is independent, strong-willed, and intelligent more than any heroines of other fairy tales. Nevertheless, the overall pattern of the story mostly imitates the plots of the



original fairy tale. Not only the animation but also the written tale rejects such a classical fairy formula as a passive woman succumbing to the hand of omnipotent man. Rather, the heroine plays a dynamic role that displays contents of the story and solves the tensions between characters. (Attached picture taken from http://wdfanimation.tripod.com/FeatureFilms/Beauty_Beast/beauty_beast_dvd2.jpg, 1/28/05).

III. The real value of a woman – Freedom and Creativity

The young heroine of this story combines the virtue of beauty throughout the story. In this story, the wonderful appearance of a young woman attracts young men who try to get her attention. She is the most beautiful girl in her town. All young men try to



acquire a special favor from her and hope to marry her. However, her popularity does not involve only her wonderful appearance. Her two older sisters are also beautiful enough to attract young men in the town. The real charm of Beauty is clearly manifested in contrast with her sisters' wicked deeds. In the end, they are turned tragically into marble statues, while Beauty becomes a happy princess. Why is their fate different from Beauty's at the last moment despite their physical beauty? Throughout the story, on one hand, her two sisters are concerned with vicious deeds that are affected by their bad nature. On the other hand, Beauty continues to show the quality of her inner nature through her relationships

with all young men in the town, her poor father who fails in business, and the Beast whose body is like a monster. Whereas her two sisters represent the sins of pride, jealousy, and greed, the inner nature of Beauty can be roughly identified as hospitality, filial piety, diligence, purity, courage, sacrifice, freedom, and so on. Accordingly, the real meaning of the name Beauty instructs us that the real value of a woman does not lie in her physical appearance, but in her inner nature. (Attached picture taken from <http://beauty.rivkashome.com/lamb.htm>, 1/28/05).

However, modern feminists will not be reluctant to criticize that the emphasis of these characteristics of Beauty is nothing but the male selfish desire, which is conventionally to limit the range of political and economical activities of women in society. In fact, women have been traditionally treated as subordinated beings in the household for their husbands. Accordingly, women have been naturally associated with moral virtues rather than social abilities. However, Beauty's inner virtues in this story do not reflect conventional satisfaction for men. Rather, they play dynamic roles to unfold the matters of the story and solve the tensions in this story. In this story, the characteristics of Beauty are powerful enough to surpass the masculinity of the Beast

who is a patriarchal young prince in the castle. Reflecting on the characteristics of Beauty, I would like to say that the inner nature of women essentially has implicit ability not only to overcome the biased conventionality but also to fulfill the requisites of modern feminism that emphasize the spirit of autonomy and freedom of women.

The most impressive feature among Beauty's inner virtues is freedom. According to the story, especially in the animation, Beauty decides to go to the castle and live with the Beast by her own will. Although she has been pressed by mercy on her father and by fear of the demonic appearance of the Beast, she decides on a subject of her own life. She persists on exercising her own freedom to select her own life and death. This independent spirit is the most important virtue to define Beauty as the model of feminism. Feminism, as matter of fact, emphasizes the spirit of freedom as the main agenda to treat women as equal beings and not subordinated beings in their relationships with men.

Freedom is also a very important theological term. Augustine argues that the first man, Adam, was depraved by his free will and that all human beings have free will to accept or reject grace before God (Hodgson, p.179). Karl Rahner also similarly claims that human beings have freedom to transcend and to actualize themselves. Self-transcending and self-actualizing acts are the exercise of true freedom (Karl Rahner, pp 3-38). By acquiring this freedom before God, human beings can act as the subject in relationship with God even though they are time-and-space-bound creatures. On the basis of this characteristic freedom, men and women are all equal.

Nevertheless, it is true that the Scriptures describe women as negative beings that commit to sexual sins or objects of temptation that lead men to ruin. In order to restrict these wicked features, the Bible also teaches women to be pure, silent, and obedient in relationships with men and in their communities. Then, are women in fact inferior beings according to the authority of the Bible? If so, is the concept of the Bible really right that woman should be a subordinate being to man? Introspectively, we can realize that the Bible hides a multitude of examples of women who have dynamic virtues such as Beauty beyond the patriarchal biased norms in the Bible. The inner virtues of women in the Bible powerfully influenced the birth and development of Judaism and the early Christian church.

For example, Sarah protects her husband Abraham who became later the forefather of all Israelites by sacrificing herself to pagans who coveted her beautiful body (Gen 12:13, 20:2). The laborious diligence of Zipporah brings her to the opportunity to meet Moses and consoles him in marriage from the wandering who was the hero of the exodus of Egypt (Ex 2:16). The filial piety of Ruth who serves her widow mother-in-law with all her heart makes an instrument of God that became the foremother of David as her offspring who is the greatest King of Israel (Ru 4:22). The courage of Esther, who approached king Ahasuerus at the risk of her life, saves the Israelites from the intrigue of the massacre by Haman, the enemy of the Jews (Es 4:16). The self-sacrificing of Hanna, who offered her only child to the Temple, leads her child Samuel to be the great prophet to open the door of the royal regime from the confederation of twelve tribes of Israel (2 Sam 1:28). Mary is so pure when she is selected as the holy mother to bear Jesus Christ, the savior of humanity (Lk 1:30-35). Besides, biblical scholars claim that countless anonymous women have made the backbone of the Christian church.

Thus, reflecting on these biblical messages and documents, we can conclude that woman's nature is never passive but very dynamic to lead the creation, change, and

advance of history. If the masculinity of men would be called the hardware of Christian history, the inner nature of women must be compared to the software that actually runs the history. Interestingly, Paul emphasizes the life of the inward being who is renewed rather than the outward being who perishes day by day (2 Cor 4:16). Then, how can we renew the inward being? Paul suggests bearing the virtues of Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance (Gal 5:22-23). The universe that God created in the beginning looked good in the ultimate beauty (Gn 1:31) because God created all creatures with God's beautiful nature that can be represented as the feminine qualities that Paul mentions. Therefore, if God the father is the invisible author of the universe, God the mother is the invisible creator of the universe. God entrusts the power of childbirth to woman. Woman becomes the womb for human life functioning to transmit human genes to next generations. Also, mothers take care of their children with deeper affection more than fathers do. I assume that the reason why a new infant is beautiful would be because he or she is created by God in a woman's womb. The reason why human beings can keep the dignity would be because they resemble the mother's nature.

Moreover, my claim is that God's freedom is the very basis of God's creativity or creative act. God is absolutely free in God's existence. God creates everything freely with God's free will as a potter makes pottery (Jr 18:6, Ro 9:21). Then freedom is the source of creation. Therefore, feminist theology should consider feminine nature, wherein freedom is the most important dimension, is related to the creativity of God.

III. What "*Beauty and the Beast*" symbolizes – Love and Redemption

The hero of this story was originally born as a prince. But an evil witch cursed him into a beast. Only the love of a virgin could break the curse and return him back into his real self. Confined in the curse of the evil, the Beast had waited for the love of a virgin who was able to save him in his alienated castle. What then implies the downfall to the beast from his princehood? This dual side of the Beast represents the state of the human existence. Augustine argues that human beings are made of the immortal soul in the image of God (Gen 1:26) and the mortal body depraved by original sin (Hodges, p 147).

In the story, the Beast can have easily dominated the beautiful woman with his sexual power. However, he does not act violently according to his ugly body. Instead, he respects her chastity and autonomy with a sense of dignity. Thus, human beings are dual beings who exist in tensions with two contradictory qualities of dignity and depravity. However, the problem is that human beings have self-responsibility to make choices to stay in the state of animal or go forward to the life of divinity. According to Karl Rahner, human beings are infinite beings who are able to transcend themselves, and, at the same time, finite beings who can devote themselves to their concrete world restricted in time and space (Karl Rahner, p 32). Therefore, the human existence originally combines solitude in anguish between transcendence to eternity and



despair to death. This is the concept, "*To be or not to be*". Like the name Beast, human beings are basically nothing but animal. Nevertheless, they deserve grace from God because they still keep the inner divinity. The possibility of transcendence is based on the inner dignity. (Attached picture taken from <http://www.story-lovers.com/res/beautybst.jpg>, 1/28/05).

The advent of Beauty incites the dignity of the Beast confined in the solitary existence. Hoping recovery to his real self, the Beast depends on the power of salvation from Beauty. She has the power to return the Beast to his original status, prince. What then is the identity of her power to break the curse of the evil? When the father asks his children what gift they would like for the trip, Beauty simply asks for a rose, unlike her sisters who request self-indulgent items. The rose represents love. Also, she has been in the status of the virgin until she was faced with the Beast. Thus, Beauty satisfies both universal and concrete condition to save the Beast because she is not only the essence of love but also the very virgin. On the other hand, her two sisters had once met with the requirement of the concrete condition of the virgin, but they were not qualified to encounter the Beast because they lacked the universal power, love.

The tremendous turning point in this story is the scene that the Beast is awakened from the deep sleep of despair and turns to the state of a prince in the twinkling of an eye. However, we must not neglect the meaning of the romantic scene that the sudden transformation of the Beast happened in Beauty's confession of love. As I noted above, human beings are the subjects between the infinite transcendence and the finite actuality. At the moment that they choose to transcend themselves, however, human beings should depend on the absolutely divine Being to lead them to eternity. Karl Rahner argues, "Such transcendence is invited by God and takes place in union with God" (Karl Rahner, p. 39)." Then, how is it possible that human beings can be united with God, and what is the meaning of the union with God? Tillich claims that "the Logos (God) who became flesh," is the way to lead humanity from death to eternal life (Tillich, p. 16). Only Christ Jesus is the only Savior for all humanity in pain of death. For he is the universal Logos and, at the same time, the concrete flesh. The symbol of Jesus as "a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Pt 1:19) in the New Testament matches with the concept of "the Incarnated Logos". In the union of Christ Jesus, human beings can finally become "New Beings" who are able to transcend themselves to eternal life from the human finitude that is restricted in time and space. In other words, through Christ Jesus, human beings can be united with God. Union with God means union of love because God is love.

Turing again to the story, Beauty can symbolize Jesus Christ, based on the fact that she transformed the Beast to a "New Being" in the presence of her love. In others words, the love of Beauty made the animal Beast evolve into a real human being. Love is the divine gift from God that leads human beings to the living existence from solitary existence. Love is the power of salvation that awakes human life from eternal death. The first man Adam was solitary in his loneliness. He was fallen in deep despair. When he met Eve, he could escape from his solitude and make a real human life in union of love with Eve. Thus, reflecting on the biblical view, a woman is the best gift freely given to a man by God. God loves humanity so that God sends God's only son, Jesus, to save us from the eternal death (Jn 3:16). Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep (1 Cor 15:20). We receive Jesus Christ as the gift freely given to humanity by God.

In the relevant context, the first woman Eve, who evolves Adam from the animal beast to a human being, is compared to Christ Jesus, who recovers us sinners to children of God. Even though the anonymous male writers of the Bible regarded Jesus as the last Adam and also Jesus as husband and his believers as wife in the relation of salvation, in fact, beyond the male metaphors, Jesus Christ has been presented to human beings with Eve. In this biblical context, feminist theology have to point out that women have enough inner power to bring about love and redemption to humanity confined to the existence of despair and anxiety.

IV. The future of feminist theology

I have tried to raise the value of women by applying the inner nature of women to the creativity of God based on freedom and the redemption of God based on love. However, if I claim that only women deserve these divine characteristics of God, my feminist view may be nothing but another side of favoritism in Christian tradition. Paul apparently states that all human races are in fact one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28).

On the basis of this equality in Christ Jesus, I would like to restate that both women and men must share two concepts; first, God's freedom is the basis of God's creativity; secondly, God's love is the basis of redemption. In the fairy tale, when Beauty acknowledges that she actually loves the Beast, expresses her love, and asks to live to be her husband, the Beast is transformed again to a glorious man in the status of prince in the twinkling of an eye. The image of the Beast at this final moment is similar to the resurrected Jesus who showed himself before his disciples who finally confessed their faith and love to Jesus Christ. In this viewpoint, the Beast is also compared to Christ Jesus. The real important point, therefore, is that they made themselves the gift of love with each other.

In the beginning, the universe is full of freedom, peace, and harmony in God's creation. At the end of human time, the Kingdom of God will be full of love in God's redemption. The Kingdom of God has no marks of such partiality as androcentrism, sexism, separatism, and racism. Rather, it is the place that the strong and the weak, the big and the small, and the valuable and the mean live together in peaceful harmony. Also, there are no men or women, but only children of God. Jesus Christ also tells that the Kingdom of God belongs to such as little children (Mt 19:14). However, the infants cannot grow up by themselves. They need their mother to nurse and keep them from the evil world. In this context, the Kingdom of God is like the warm bosom of a mother. Therefore, feminist theology should point out the actualization of the Kingdom of God that is reflected on Isaiah's vision through the inner virtues of creativity and redemption of women.

The *wolf* will live with the *lamb*, the *leopard* will lie down with the *goat*, the calf and the *lion* and the *yearling* together; and a *little child* will lead them. The cow will feed with the *bear*, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the *ox*. The *infant* will play near the hole of the *cobra*, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all *my holy mountain*, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea (Isa 11:6-9).

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