



Research Paper

The Treatment of Tess in Thomas Hardy's novel Tess of the d'Urbervilles

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ABSTRACT

Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* contains complex and detailed interrogations of many Victorian values and of the capitalist culture of his time. This novel is a fierce condemnation of the social, ethical, moral, religious and political values held by the majority of Hardy's cultural elite contemporaries in England. The most obvious example of Hardy's cultural criticism is his assertion in the novel's subtitle that Tess is "A Pure Woman". In the recent times Hardy's fictional treatment of women remains a controversial issue. His work is a manifestation of his awareness of the inequality and injustice against women. Hardy sympathizes the women who are subject to social and sexual vulnerability. His fiction revolves around female protagonists for whom he expresses parental affection. His novels depict the heroic struggle of the female characters. Hardy blames the society which is dominated by men, male thoughts and rigid rules. He also targets the strong male instinct that demands the women to sacrifice their desires while serving men. This paper will examine Hardy's treatment and depiction of Tess and her problems.

KEYWORDS: Treatment of women in Victorian England, capitalism & gender issues.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Gender is the social classification of male and female. Gender refers to the inequality between man and woman. Kimmel explains that, "Sex is male and female; gender is masculinity and femininity-What it means to be a man or a woman." (Kimmel, 2004: p.3) Gender is an attitude; in a society certain trends are practiced by people and there are certain learnt behaviors. The way people behave what they expect from one another in terms of behavior? All these matters are related to gender. According to Kamla Bhasin, "The word gender is now being used sociologically... gender refers to the socio- cultural definition of man and woman, the ways societies distinguish men and women and assign them social roles." (Bhasin, 2004: p. 1) Hardy's fiction explicitly sheds light on the matters of gender. The plots of his novels revolve around female protagonists who are the victims of society, social norms, etc. With reference to women Hardy in his novels refers to the differences that are gender biased and are artificial. He satirizes that passivity and kindness; the traits considered to be the most important part of a woman's character, are gender based and have nothing to do with sex. He critically depicts that we live in a gendered society which is male dominated and where women occupy subordinate position. By putting women in miserable condition he indirectly targets the social setup that is in dire need of reformation and improvement. By the mid 1990s, feminist literary critics wrote extensively about gender issues and the status of women within Tess while Marxist literary critics explored the role that class conflict plays within the novel. Penny Boumelha's groundbreaking book, *Thomas Hardy and Women Sexual Ideology and Narrative Form*, which was published in 1982, devotes an entire chapter to Tess. This chapter simultaneously examines the novel from both Marxist and feminist perspective. Boumelha writes about "the components of Tess's complex class-position (decayed aristocratic lineage, economic membership of the newly forming rural proletariat, modified by an education that provides her with a degree of access to the culture of the bourgeoisie (117)". She emphasizes that within Tess, Hardy is depicting "the fact that sexual and marital relationships are presented in such direct relation to economic pressures and to work"(119).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) is an author of great caliber. He stands supreme amongst the literary figures of the Darwin's Age. The conventional criticism highlights the negative aspects of Hardy's art whereas the present research deviates from the stereotypical criticism which restricted his approach to pessimism, fatalism, agnosticism, atheism, etc. The present research highlights those aspects of Hardy's art which open up new vistas with reference to his work and his tragic vision embraces another dimension. It shows that the label of pessimism with reference to Hardy's philosophy is an old cliché as tragedy in the world of Hardy is not the result of his pessimistic attitude rather his environment was full of pain and suffering which he depicted with empathic approach. Hardy is a modern novelist as he concentrates on the current issues such as gender, class, social and psychological disorders, etc. According to critics "Thomas Hardy's early novels show in embryo many of the characteristics to be found in the later masterpieces". (Regan, 2001: p. 332).

One of the key issues in his novels is the position and treatment of the women in society. According to Stephen Regan, "Thomas Hardy repeatedly shaped his characters and plots to show his sympathy with women and his awareness of the disadvantages society laid upon them".... (Regan, 2001: p. 344) His novels are about the incredibly simple, deprived and courageous women. The core of his novels is heroines' struggle for survival in the hostile world. Hardy depicts the picture of oppression and degradation of women. The society regards women as valuable commodities. A gesture of friendship from a woman is interpreted in sexual terms. Women are subject to physical, sexual and verbal violence. Female retaliation is disapproved as society wants women to be docile, affectionate, passive and self-sacrificing.

Hardy revolts against such social norms and customs and his novels deal with the spiritual struggle of women for survival. He condemns male dominancy and in his novels we find the heroines' struggle to cross the deep abyss of the changeless male dominant social order to become a whole person. In the nineteenth century, "the social construction of women became a central tenet for the spate of writings... arguing that women had been oppressed and exploited by the "patriarchal" order of society, which defined them as "Other" (Walder, 2001: p. 5). Hardy also targets patriarchal culture and shows that women must rebel against the role in which tradition has placed them. In his novels Hardy deals with the matters of gender. Sex remains same whereas gender is variable. Hardy believes that gender is socially constructed and it is a men-made phenomenon. He also shows that the status of men and women in a society is culturally and socially determined. He condemns the way women, in society, are relegated and are considered as inferior beings.

III. DISCUSSION

Hardy's novels are concerned with the matters of gender. They deal with the position of women in society. He highlights the merits and demerits of the social spectrum especially with reference to women. The nineteenth century writers were concerned with female emancipation and the rights of women. Hardy, in his novels, mainly concentrates on the matters of gender.

In a society, the women have to struggle more than the men to prove their talents as society develops a biased approach towards them. In *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, Elfride Swancourt writes and publishes a romance, "*The Court of King Arthur's Castle; a Romance of lyonnaise*" (Hardy, 1985: p.39). Her work is badly criticized by the reviewer. On the other hand, Hardy shows Henry Knight, another character in the novel as an intellectual and scholar who is a successful essayist and reviewer. According to Barbara Hardy it is infact Hardy who projects Elfride Swancourt as, "...creatively unsuccessful compared with the men...the essayist and reviewer who is another."(Barbara Hardy, 2000: p.8) In Hardy's novels women, while performing particular tasks are, often, failed to accomplish the work successfully. For instance, Tess could not solve the financial problem of the family.

In Hardy's novels and even poems, usually, the leading roles are performed by females. In his novels, he shows that men love women and want to dominate them. They can go to any extent to suppress them. Hardy presents strong female characters who are unconventional such as Bathsheba is presented as a female farmer supervising the male workers. In his stories a woman somewhat dominates if she comes across a man of lower class such as Bathsheba dominates Gabriel Oak. In a relationship between man and woman belonging to the same class, the former dominates the later. Bathsheba rejecting Gabriel Oak marries Sergeant Troy, a man of high class. In this relationship, she is dominated by Troy.

In Hardy's novels, he concentrates on the theme of seduction. In every society, women are the victim of sexual exploitation. Hardy shows that, especially, the women of the lower class are vulnerable. They can be attacked and disgraced easily. With reference to Hardy's works the term exploitation has broader implication such as it also refers to economic exploitation. Usually women are the victim of economic exploitation. Because of poverty they are forced to sell their labor or offer services at low rates. It is considered that both women and laborers are oppressed.

In the nineteenth century the writers related the inequality amongst the classes, to the inequality between the sexes. The women workers were preferred as they were cheaply paid. Hardy portrays vivid pictures

of the farm laborers and the women are the most exploited among them. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* Hardy depicts the condition of the labourers who work at the Flintcomb- Ash farm where, "for some probably economical reason it was usually a woman who was chosen for this particular duty.... The hum of the thresher, which prevented speech, increased to a raving whenever the supply of corn fell short of the regular quantity. As Tess and the man who fed could never turn their heads...." *Tess Of The D'Urbervilles*. (Hardy, 1891: p. 417).

In the world of Hardy men if accused of adultery are forgiven but women even if victim of seduction are not forgiven. And that is what bothers Hardy greatly. Hardy got intensely moved by the revelation of social inequality and hypocritical view of morality. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* Hardy criticizes the double standard of morality". He uncovered an agonizing attitude of society that an unchaste man is not answerable before the society but a woman who is victim of seduction and is "more sinned against than sinning" finds no second chance to revive. She is always scared of her dark past. Hardy also satirizes the hypocritical view of morality that men can but women can't "afford pas". Hardy calls Tess "a pure woman". She is seduced by Alec and physically she may be impure but her spirit is pure. Her motive, impulses, actions remain positive. She never thinks of giving harm to anyone. In the above mentioned novel the segment "The Woman Pays" mirrors the true picture of the Victorian society that, "...in the nineteenth century, it is the woman who incurs the social stigma for behaviour for which men may be chiefly to blame.

Hardy is attacking the Victorian concept of the double standard by which extramarital sexual activity by men is condoned as a natural weakness but if engaged in by women is censured as evidence of vice" (Mahon, 1976: p-64). Tess flops like fish at the hands of system, which bears no acknowledgement of her efforts to bring happiness to others, even, at the cost of her dignity. "Hardy makes it clear that it is the condemnation of society rather than the mishap itself that fills her with a painful sense of guilt." (Mahon, 1976: p.69)

Hardy in his writings blends several shades but the tragic tinge is quite prominent in all the novels. In fact Hardy exposes the evil present in the nineteenth century Victorian England. The irony is that every society is infested with such drawbacks, but very few writers dare to touch the topics of seduction and deception. In every society women are being exploited. If Tess loses her honour while striving to solve the financial problem of the family, so many women go through the same situation but remain speechless as the exposure of the wrong being done to them brings no remedy. They rather become source of fun and ridicule. If Elizabeth Jane is deceived in love by Donald Farfrae, so many similar stories are being fabricated every moment around. Hardy's main motive is to expose the cruelty being done to the ladies. Compton Rickett says that Hardy's, "...sense of pity is perhaps more acute than that of any modern writer... he treats with gentle tolerance the passionate misdoings of men and women..."(Rickett, 1993: p.545)

After going through the work one can imagine of Hardy's being bleeding profusely. It seems as if sufferings of every fair heroine contribute a new wound to his decaying spirit. Duffin states that, "It is not Hardy who treats his women cruelly, but life-life as Hardy saw it. What Hardy could do for his women how did- he made them full of beauty, interest, fascinating and loveable qualities of all kinds, he gave them great parts to play, and let them (generally) play those parts well. His estimate of women is high, but tempered and conditioned by keen observation of the realities around him. He has the necessary ideals of her as a creature nobly planned and bright with angelic radiance, but he knows also that it is only in rare cases that she if found free, undimmed, ideal ... Hardy is no misogynist, but true lover in very deed." (Duffin, 1991: p.238) Women in Hardy's novels are the color and beauty of the world; their breath is the fragrance of flowers, heart deeper than ocean and brain vaster than sky. But, unfortunately, in spite of having all these qualities, they are destroyed.

IV. CONCLUSION

Social relations should be formed on the basis of human dignity and respect. Gender related issues usually evoke hostility between men and women which often ends in death. Equality between men and women is essential for peaceful relationships in society. Gender equality does not mean that women should enter public arena and behave like men. Men and women should join hands to achieve gender equality and to turn the world into heaven upon earth. Gender equality demands that men and women may overcome their negative conceptions about each other: male as aggressive and domineering and female as submissive and fearful. They should better exercise their positive qualities. The present day world is experiencing immense violence and destruction. All these can only be healed by developing positive qualities in humanity. In fact the present polarized and ecologically devastated world is in dire need of co- operation.

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