



Research Paper

The Portrayal of “Fallen Woman” in Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*

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Abstract:

In the 19th century, particularly in Britain, the phrase 'fallen woman' developed to be intimately connected with the loss of a woman's chastity and the surrender of her virginity. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is a novel written by British author Thomas Hardy about an innocent rural girl who is tormented by the combined powers of Victorian Patriarchal Society as well as the unfairness of social rules. In this novel, Tess is victimized by the hypocrisy of societal prejudice and the disparity in society, both of which are caused by the presence of male supremacy. Throughout the novel, Hardy exhibits his deep compassion for Tess, the protagonist, who represents rural women who have been ruthlessly devastated by a male-dominated environment. I intend to show through my paper how Tess became a victim of social prejudice where a woman is subject to discrimination and the role played by Victorian Patriarchal Society that ultimately led to her fall as shown by Thomas Hardy in his novel, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. It is the aim of this paper to investigate how Tess's fall is connected to male supremacy along with idea of deep-rooted patriarchy in Victorian society.

Keywords: Victorian Era, Thomas Hardy, Fallen Woman, Femininity, Patriarchy

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Victorian society imposes a strict dichotomy on the role of women and her femininity. In the Victorian ideology of patriarchy, women were restricted to their homes performing their duties as comforting wives and loving and caring moms. The Victorian ideals gave importance to a chaste woman who was supposed to perform her conventional role of that of a wife and a mother. The term 'fallen woman' has been originally used to describe the view that, in order to be ethically as well as socially adequate, woman's experience along with sexuality must be completely limited to marriage only, as well as she must be under the supervision of a powerful male at all times. As already mentioned, the concept of a 'fallen woman' has its roots in patriarchy. Tess is subjected to excruciating pressure from male-dominance, symbolized in Angel along with Alec, in a male-centered society in which everyone is dictated by the desire of the man. This strain may be expressed when Tess tells Alec about her seduction:

“See how you’ve mastered me!” (Thomas Hardy’s, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, Chapter 12, Page 70)

Another way to see how males manipulate women is through Tess's complaint to her mother.

“Why didn’t you tell me there was a danger in men folk? Why didn’t you warn me? Ladies knew what to feed hands against because they read novels that tell them of the tricks, but I never had the chance of learning in that way, and you didn’t help me!”

(*Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, Chapter 12, Page-74)

The warning of Alec to Tess also reflects this.

“Remember my lady, I was your master once; I will be your master again” (Thomas Hardy’s, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*)

No question, women are at the mercy of males in a society where men have privilege and superiority. It is imperative that they conform to the will of men or face the consequences of the public opinion and social laws. In Victorian culture, the idea of male superiority and male dominance pervades, putting pressure on women who are seen as inferior. Tess's mother's intentions to marry her off in order to provide for the family place her in a vulnerable position, and she becomes a victim of her mother's manipulation, Joan whose opportunism fully creates an unfavorable situation for Tess and putting Tess in Alec d'Urberville's hands. Even after sexually exploiting Tess, Tess's experience of Alec's physical invasion, violating her virginity, his sin is unrecognized by him. Alec on the other hand blames Tess to tempt him with her beauty. He commits the act of rape but puts all the blame on Tess. The law does not punish or condemn Alec. The innocent Tess pays for the guilty; she experiences scorn and she is disdained wherever she goes. We observe that for sinner, sinned suffers. Instead of being chastised or penalized, Alec the actual sinner becomes a preacher. If a sinner may become a saint, why can't the innocent enjoy the same privileges as other members of society? There are no consequences for the male offender, however the female who has sinned is subjected to prejudice and condemnation from society, while the male preacher preaches about God's decision.

"He who had wrought her undoing was now on the side of the spirit, while she remained unregenerate"
(Thomas Hardy's, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*)

Destruction by Angel of Tess is much more awful than Alec's devastation of her. Due to his upbringing in a Victorian social system, Angel is unable to see himself in an equal partnership with a woman who is not chaste. His superiority is determined by his gender. While Angel's London escapades may be excused, Tess's inadvertent misconduct can never be forgotten or forgiven. In both Angel's rejection and Alec's transgression and the narrow-mindedness about chastity and virginity is exposed and the bad effects are shown. We observe that it is the woman who pays in this society. Both Angel and Alec represent the inhumanity that males have towards women. Tess's virginity is so important in Victorian society that Alec physically destroys her, but Angel psychologically destroys her by taking away her bravery for love and life. Hardy uses the analogy of a horse to make his point. This is the horse's cost; a horse may be replaced, but lost virginity cannot be restored, that foreshadows the terrible fate of the protagonist in the book, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.

Tess is referred to as a "fallen woman" throughout the novel as a result of her first fall, which was her sexual engagement with Alec. This causes her to feel guilty everywhere she goes. People abuse her when she returns to her hometown. In Church, *"the people who had turn their heads turned them again as the service proceeded and at last observing her they whispered to each other"*.

(Thomas Hardy's, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*)

Tess is aware of what they have been discussing and is so wounded that she declares she would not go to church. Tess still cannot escape even in the field, people discussing her misfortunes and her child which was the result of her rape by Alec. Guilt hangs over her, and she begins to think, *"She might be happy in some nook which had no memories. To escape the past and all that appertained thereto was to annihilate it; and to do that she would have to get away"*

(Thomas Hardy's, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Chapter 15, Page-89)

"Was once lost always lost really true of chastity? She would ask herself." (Chapter 15, Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*)

As states in above given lines Tess contemplates a question that is, she irredeemably impure because she is a fallen woman. Tess is compelled to leave her home under the immense burden of societal discrimination, and she travels from one place to other. Tess is unable to withstand the consequences of her tragedy. Furthermore, Tess's family is even responsible in the heinous punishment that has been meted out to her. The "purity" of the community is so important to the society that even her family's final hope of remaining in the village is destroyed. A woman like Tess who is termed impure can no longer be a part of that village. Tess recognizes that she has a negative impact on her family that increases her feelings of regret as well as responsibility. She will experience her second "fall" in the near future as a result of this. Her horrible life is framed by two falls.

Tess is cruelly abandoned by her newlywed husband in Chapter 35 of the book, and it is all because she has revealed the truth about her family's background. The fact that Angel is involved in Tess's downfall to a greater level is unquestionable. Angel's rejection stands in stark dissimilarity to Tess's gracious mercy. Angel's hesitance shows the "double moral standard" that exists in Victorian culture, how a woman thinks about her sexual intimacies and her sentiments about being a female. As a result of his desire to trust in the purity of Tess,

Angel could not handle the revelation of her unlawful sexual connection with Alec. This may be observed in his instant reaction once Tess confessed the truth about herself:

“You were one person; now you are another. My God- how can forgiveness meet such a grotesque-prestidigitation as that!”
(Thomas Hardy’s, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*)

In the opinion of Angel, Initially, Tess was a picture of purity and virginity, but as she opens up to Angel about her past; he gets blinded by his idealistic beliefs. He was still slave to custom and beliefs based on patriarchy that makes Tess a victim of Angel’s injustice on marriage. Tess was able to withstand the fall induced by Alec, but Angel turns it into an agonizing experience that she could not take because Tess loved Angel dearly and it hit her very hard when she found out that even Angel is not ready to take a stand for her and puts her down just like everyone else did with her. When she kills a bird, she exhibits her empathy for those who are suffering and denied of their basic needs, and she also suggests the concept of death as an end to suffering. Tess's self-awareness correlates with her unusual calmness just before she gets caught for stabbing Alec and fleeing with Angel. Tess who was throughout judged as we see in the novel decides she would die rather than be humiliated and tortured each and every time by all the people living in the society for such a crime which she never committed. Tess was arrested and executed. It is death which releases Tess from the pains and sufferings she endured all through her life. Death ends her miserable life filled with obstructions as well as misadventures triggered by social influences and oppression of a female, questioning femininity in a society which is governed by the strict principles of patriarchal rule during the Victorian period. Women in this society were expected to preserve the family against the mundane world. In the Victorian patriarchal society, a woman cannot lapse morally and if such a thing happens, the woman is expelled from the respectable British society.

Finally, Tess symbolizes a country girl who is wrecked by male dominance and social prejudices, constraints, throughout the late nineteenth century. When it comes to society, Tess is a mirror of that culture, as well as the embodiment of women who were relegated to the bottom of society during the Victorian era. Due to her father’s family glory dream, her fall has been triggered, which is directly connected with two “falls” along with betrayal of two men’s that creates the structure of this story. Tess is ruined as well as made a fallen woman without giving her any second chance to mend whatever damage was done to her life. Tess was subjected to physical invasion as well as spiritual oppression. A woman who has fallen from grace is supported by Thomas Hardy in his book, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*. He believes that a woman who has fallen from grace may be forgiven if society has given her a second opportunity. Hardy in the novel provides a chance to Tess to legalize her fall through marriage but her honest confession made to Angel ruins everything. She could not break free from the position of a fallen woman. Hardy was successful in widening the observations of his readers when he observed the cruel, injustice and inequalities prevalent in the Victorian society. Through the depiction of Tess as well as the emphasis on her chastity, he valiantly and persistently challenges the norms of Victorian society associated with femininity.

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