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Thomas Hardy's Female Characters Represent the Problem of Contemporary Victorian Society

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The purpose of this paper is to study the cultural and social predicament of women in 19th Century through the novels of Thomas Hardy. Reading his novels, it can be easily understand the contemporary socio-cultural situation of women. Through the three major novels *Far From the Madding Crowd*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, I have prepare this paper. The Victorian society was governed by various behavioral and ethical codes for women. It was the woman who becomes the victim of patriarchal rules of society which lead to their exploitation outside the domestic sphere of life. To sum up, we can say that through his novels the author tries to give voice to his female characters and allow them to challenge the social order. The novels provide the real depiction of contemporary social status of women.

The Victorian society was governed by various behavioural and ethical code for women. It was the woman who became the victim of patriarchal rules of society which led to their exploitation outside the domestic sphere of life. Women were rarely expected to take part in any social work or any work of discovery and exploration. Their place in the society was defined by men. However, with the nineteenth century came an increased recognition of 'the Woman Question' and a demand for Victorian women to "redefine their sexual natures and rediscover women's place in society at large, with a reconsideration of the female role in literature and life." (Rosalind 151)

Thomas Hardy demonstrates his awareness that women's role in the Victorian society was artificially created. Many of Hardy's female protagonists are intelligent and their inquisitive nature leads them to make mistake because of their conditioning by society. Female characters challenge the conventional perception of marriage and gender and traditional ideas about social class. Hardy tries to give voice to his female characters to allow them to challenge the social injustices. Women try to explore their limitations but they are ultimately silenced by the conventional social order.

The novel *Far From the Madding Crowd* represents the problems of a contemporary woman and her inability to cope with the changing world. The female protagonist, Bathsheba struggles to reside within the narrow confines which are imposed on her by the society. At the beginning of the novel, Bathsheba is introduced as a beautiful reckless, possibly rather rain young girl who "wants

somebody to tame" (FFMC 26). She enjoys and admires herself "as a fair product of Nature" (FFMC 6). She is a young girl who likes herself and sees nothing wrong in doing so. She is not self-centred as we see her going out of way to save Oak's life when he shuts himself in his hut and nearly suffocates.

Far From Madding Crowd was written at a time when the British women's rights movement had begun but was still burdened by the restrictive society. In the 1870s, Feminist condemned women's economic oppression and wished them to be independent. They also protested against the loss of legal and political rights for women. The women's right's activists revealed their dissatisfaction of traditional marriage and instead of it advocated marriages based on love, companionship, equality and women's autonomy. In the novel, author also rejects the traditional concept of marriage. He attempts to explore the restricted and disempowered status of women through the experiences of Bathsheba. He attacks the society that crashes women's desire to lead a free life. Bathsheba's attitude towards life is a sign of her desire to a step forward outside the boundaries of the traditional female role. She says "I shall be up before you are awake; I shall be a field before you are up; and In short, I shall astonish you all" (FFMC).

Even though the whole society talks about Bathsheba that, as a women, she cannot succeed as a farmer, she actually contradicts this proposition by being quite successful in her attempts. She manages the farms, goes to the corn-market, and manages all the duties of a farmer with the same capability as a man. Therefore, she does not see any necessity to take a husband apart from the social pressure of custom.

Very few jobs were available for the Victorian women. The Victorian society believed that women were weak by nature and their strength and weakness should be measured only in terms of the prevailing social norms. Mary Lyndon Shanley points out:

The pressure on women to marry were enormous in the nineteenth - century England A few fortunate middle-class women might be supported by a father, brother, or other relative, but for most middle-class as well as working class women marriage was an economic necessity. Legal rules, social practices and economic structures all worked together to induce a woman to marry and then insured that once married she would be dependent upon and obedient to her husband. (Shanley 10)

Bathsheba stands apart from her male counterparts because of gender. She has not the full resources of language as a man would have if he would be in her position. Spender claims in his man - made language that the women of the Victorian society had to identify themselves with the patriarchal world. If any woman of the contemporary society tend to defy the masculine order, she would be ultimately

silenced by the opposite, dominating gender. Gail Cunningham also presents characteristics of the contemporary women in his work, *The New Women and The Victorian Novels*. In his opinion, women had always been used as a source of "artistic inspiration" though often not in a positive way.

Far From the Madding Crowd presently the problem of women's inability to articulate in the language of patriarchy. Bathsheba does not flout the values of the male-dominated society in which she resides. The female characters struggle to reside within the narrow confines which are imposed on her by the society. Although Bathsheba is rebellious by nature and expects that one day she would settle as a good Victorian wife even though at first Bathsheba has no concern in being "men's property" (FFMC 24).

Being a female, Bathsheba possesses emotionality and lacks the prudence often associated with male characters. As a result, her communication based on intuition - makes her less considerate to the literal meanings of words. Bathsheba uses words which are more solemn than she is aware of, as her feminine meaning lies more in the frivolous intent of her epistle and less in the literal meaning conveyed to one who can read only the words.

Bathsheba states: "It is difficult for a woman to describe her feeling in language which is primarily made by men to express their" (FFMC 278). Kate Millate in the *Sexual Politics* asserts the same thought when she remarks that in the "social circumstances, male and female are really two cultures and the experiences are entirely different" (Millage 30).

In the novel we find that Bathsheba is a courageous woman. She shocks everyone in the village by being in the position of a man, as a landowner and the bailiff of her property and works with aggressive confidence. To sum up, it can be said that Hardy portrays his female characters a way which reflects the disadvantages of women in a conventional society as the Victorian age way. Although Bathsheba was surrounded by the conventional bondage of the Victorian society, she faced it boldly and signaled a new thought of change for modern women.

The novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge* represents the problem of a contemporary woman. The female characters Elizabeth Jane and Susan struggle within the confines of society. At the beginning of the novel, the incident of Henchard's selling his wife Susan and daughter Elizabeth-Jane to the sailor Newson, depicts the conventional thought of society. The whole society thinks of Susan and Elizabeth as a poor women, and Henchard also feels guilty for his decision and out of repentance he resolves to keep himself away from intoxications for twenty years. During this period he evolves himself into a rich Merchant and the powerful Mayor of Casterbridge.

As an author, Hardy was the parental figure of his invented characters. He may have felt as powerless as Susan Newson on her return journey dialectal words, she did not know how to behave with servants and inferior people, but she tried from the very beginning to improve herself. She set upon herself to acquire the accomplishments of a lady and to enlarge her mind. Born of poor parents and nourished in the hard necessities of life, she had little academic advantages, though she had other well-marked developed qualities.

Elizabeth-Jane endeavours to be a proper young Victorian woman. Her life and character arouse our unusual interest. H.C. Duffin speaks about her character thus:

Elizabeth-Jane is perhaps the subtlest of all Hardy's pictures of women. She is drawn in such pale tones that there is some danger of the exquisite beauty of the picture being lost under the fierce colouring of the two male portraits. (Duffin 36)

The beauty of her mind is even more remarkable than the beauty of her features. She appears first as a child, then friend and later wife. She is a patient listener and confidante and she offers to other protection and advice. She always tries to improve herself. She is very shrewd and has a great insight into and a keen desire to learn and know things around her. She is not at all agitated by either pleasant or unpleasant happening: she faces everything with equanimity and clam. She is a silent, observing woman. She soon realises that life and its surroundings are a tragical rather than a comical thing. A critic, Duffin, has also commented on her attitude, and writes thus: "She was or became, a little philosopher, learning to accept life's habit of substituting for the deep-desired the not-desired so-much" (Duffin 23). Elizabeth is a sensible girl. She knows that if good fortune could come like wind fall, it could as well disappear like a wind. She succeeds in her life through her tact, for sightedness and patient forbearance. The most prominent quality in her character is her self-scarifying nature.

On the other hand, the second female character of the novel is Lucetta, who is a young, beautiful sophisticated and glamorous, city-bred woman. Her nature is extremely superficial. She is different from Elizabeth-Jane in her attractive and gaudy dress and demeanour. Having the quality of a foil character we cannot deny that Lucetta is amiable and of kindly disposition. She is attracted towards Elizabeth-Jane by the sadness of her tone and words of their first meeting. Prof. Jaykant Mishra has compared the character of Lucetta and Elizabeth-Jane and rightly pointed thus:

There is the aggressive, the thoughtless and impulsive nature of Lucetta which is in great contrast with the thoughtful, prudent and intelligent nature of Elizabeth (Mishra 284).

Lucetta is a creature of emotions and impulses. Her love, at first sight, to Farfrae is purely impulsive and her letters to Henchard show the intensity of her impulsiveness. Lucetta has many feminine weaknesses. She is vain and looks conscious and is worried last in old age she loses her beauty. Her snobbishness and affection are quite comic but not unpleasant. We should have to feel pity for Lucetta in the tragic finale of her life. Destiny torments her with alternate hopes and fears and eventually leads her to death. Occasionally, she acts like a snob in the novel. She endeavours to act like the great lady of Casterbridge.

In the novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Hardy portrays a poor innocent country girl Tess who is victimized by the combined forces of the Victorian patriarchal society the injustice of social law, the hypocrisy of social prejudice and the inequality of male-dominance. Tess represents rural women being mercilessly ravaged in the male-dominated world. In the novel, women's struggle between the expected role and the real self is evident. Tess is seen struggling throughout for her survival as well as for the compulsion to support her family. The story of the novel deals the life of an attractive yet intelligent girl who struggles a good deal in her life in order to survive. Though, Hardy provides her many positive attributes, such as beauty, intelligence, courage and diligence; he fails to create a support system of kindness and understanding in her struggle to live independently which is reflective of the Victorian society's unforgiving attitude towards women. Tess is an example of the New Woman in her society.

During the later part of the nineteenth century, there was an enormous public discussion concerning sexuality and marriage. Tess's education demonstrates better educational opportunities for a working class girl, and perhaps better awareness of the importance of education in the century. Terrence Wright comments on this thus: "Tess stands at a transitional point in the nineteenth Century. Her education to the six standard at school sets her apart from her largely uneducated mother" (Wright 1). Tess is victimized by rigid social law, hypocritical prejudice and men's narrow-minded attitude towards gender, marriage and chastity. Undoubtedly, Tess is aware of the reality of the society she lives in and she realises the social bias towards virginity and chastity.

In this novel Tess's mother Joan represents the contemporary conventional society's thought. For instance, we see that Joan wanted Tess to marry Alec because by doing so her family's economic conditions would be greatly improved. She said to Tess, "And you haven't persuaded him to marry you!" . . . Why didn't you think of doing some good for your family instead of thinking only of yourself?" (TD 72). Nevertheless, Tess wanted to be a woman without any unequal treatment despite a great amount of oppression around her. Tess did not want to be a slave of a man and to marry a person of unequal thought. Tess is often referred to as a typical representative of her sex but there are several occasions when she is allowed to speak of herself as an individual. Tess deserves

the greatest attention and popularity. She is highly modest and is full of humility. She has an inherent sense of dignity, but she never feels vain or proud. She is an obedient daughter and wife. She is a loving sister and mother. She suffers and dies for the sake of her family and scarifies herself for the comfort and happiness of others. She puts the blame of death of her horse Prince upon herself. She starts working to maintain the economic condition of family.

Tess has become unique because the author has distinguished her by the appellation of 'pure woman'. She is said to be a pure woman even when she has had a reluctant affair with Alec D'Urbervilles. She is forced into an immoral act. Her intentions are never immoral. She is pure at heart. This purity of her character is ultimately realized by Angel who finally repents for his act of desertion of Tess. Purity of a person consists in the purity of heart, not in the so-called purity of body. Through the story, we find Tess as a pure woman. As H.C. Duffin remarks, "Among Hardy's women Tess Durbeyfield claims attention first not only by reason of popularity, but more especially in that her creator distinguished her by the appellation of a 'pure-woman'" (Duffin 218). We see that Tess is a great creation of Hardy, she teaches us to judge woman from a new sympathetic point of view. She is to linger long in our memory as a great woman than any other literary woman.

Thomas Hardy was keenly aware of women's strength and radically changing world in his times. He wrote women's strength, intelligence and capacity- all those qualities which he demonstrated as women's innate qualities. His writing was about strong, independent-minded women who were determined to live their life on their own terms. He makes his women beautiful, interesting, fascinating and gives them great part to play, but he cannot help them if life treats them cruelly. These women become model for the contemporary society and they also guide the women of modern age.

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