

## WOMEN IN VICTORIAN SOCIETY: A STUDY OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN THOMAS HARDY'S NOVELS

*Md Misbaul Haque*

*Former Post Graduation Student, Department of English, University of Gour Banga, Malda, West Bengal, India*

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper tries to discover Thomas Hardy's feminist outlook in his novels like The Mayor of Casterbridge, Tess of the D'Urbervilles, Far From the Madding Crowd, and Jude the Obscure etc. by discussing the characterization of the major female characters in these novels and the author's criticism of patriarchal hegemony and the attitude towards accepted ideas of marriage. In the Victorian society, women were treated as second sex. They became the victim of patriarchal hegemony. Patriarchy is a social system in which males hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of the property. Feminism is a range of political movements, ideologies, and social movements that share a common goal: to define, establish and achieve political, economic, personal, and social equality of sexes. This includes seeking to establish educational and professional opportunities for women that are equal to those for men. The main aim of feminism is to deny the fact where male controls the female. To bring equal status between the male and the female, we need a transformation in both the genders. Gender is a socially constructed definition of women and men. It is not the same as sex (biological characteristics of women and men) and it is not the same as women. Gender is determined by the conception of tasks, functions, and roles attributed to women and men in society and in public and private life. The male has to reduce repression, maltreatment, wife – selling, wife – beating, sexual harassment towards women.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Auction, Feminism, Patriarchy, Hegemony, Anti-Marriage*

### INTRODUCTION

Thomas Hardy portrays different types of characters in his novels but the treatment he has given to his women characters is noteworthy. Hardy's treatment of women characters is a clear reflection of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century attitudes. During the Victorian era, women were treated as second-class citizens. They became the victim of the sexual repression. Hardy had deep sympathy for women due to their sufferings in the patriarchal society. The harsh reality of Victorian society's treatment of women can be found in the novels. This aspect of the novels may be illustrated by comparing the contemporary society's condition through the female characters of the novels. Thomas Hardy's feminine outlook is very beautifully delineated in the novels like The Mayor of Casterbridge, Far From the Madding Crowd, Tess of the D'Urbervilles, Jude the Obscure etc.

In Hardy's The Mayor of Casterbridge, we find that Susan, the major character of the novel, faces the major victim of harsh treatment of male supremacy exercised by the hero of the novel, Michael Henchard. In the opening scene of the novel, we find that Henchard has auctioned his wife in the Waydon Fair. The novel begins with Henchard's selling of

his wife Susan and infant daughter at a public auction in exchange for five guineas. The sale of Susan and her daughter, Elizabeth Jane, is a sinful act which violates the moral sense of humanity. Such a sale shows Henchard's desire to trade with women as his own property and to free himself from responsibilities whenever he desires. Susan's meek acceptance of her fate and the traces of legality with which her poor mind struggles serve to highlight maltreatment of women in general. In the novel, Susan became a victim of patriarchal hegemony.

The following passage clearly depicts the tragic plight of the women in the contemporary period, "Five guineas" said the auctioneer or she'll be has withdrawn. Do anybody give it? Yes, said a loud voice from the doorways. 'You say you do?' asked the husband, staring at him.

"I say so" replied the sailor. (Ibid, Ch. I, P. 43).

This passage throws light on the patriarchal Henchard, who was the self-authorized preacher. Henchard's auctioning his wife at Waydon Fair verifies that in early 19<sup>th</sup> century England women of her class in rural districts were regarded as little more than stock to be disposed of at their owner's whim: "it has been done elsewhere" affirms that such sales were not uncommon. There seems to be no law in existence at the time to prevent a woman from being auctioned like cattle at a fair.

In the MacMillan edition of the novel published for Canadian high schools in 1962, editors Andrew A. Orr and Vivian De Sola Pinto point out that the novelist had researched the wife – selling tradition in British newspapers of the early 19th century. Thomas Hardy had heard of such a case at Portland, and that it suggested this incident to him. In the "Observer" of March 24, 1830, the following extract from the "Blackburn Gazette" appeared: "Sale of a wife – A grinder named Calton sold his wife publicly in the marketplace, Stock part, on Monday week. She was purchased by a shop-mate of the husband for a gallon of beer. The fair one, who had a halter round her neck, seemed quite agreeable."

In the 1997 Penguin edition (revised in 2003) Keith Willson notes that Hardy copied into his "Facts from Newspapers, Histories, Biographies, and other chronicles notebook (now in the Dorset Country Chronicle, whose issues from the 1820s he explored in 1884 in preparing to write *The Mayor of Casterbridge*).

R. P. Draper writes, "The return of Susan and Elizabeth Jane which precipitates the main phase of the novel is indeed a return of the repressed which forces Henchard gradually to confront the tragic inadequacy of his codes, the arid limits of patriarchal power. The fantasy that women hold men back, drag them down, drain their energy, divert their strength, is nowhere so, bleakly rebuked as in Hardy's tale of the man of character in this novel. Indeed in marrying Susan for the second time, Henchard forfeits something of his personal magic, and begins to lose power in the eyes of the town people, it is whispered that he has been captured and enervated by the genteel widow.

In health, Henchard determines the conditions of his relationships to women with minimal attention to their feelings. His remarriage to Susan is the product of strict mechanical rightness, his efforts to substantiate the union, to give it the appearance of some deeper emotion, is typical of his withholding of self.

To Susan, his kindness is an official function, and although he promises her that he will earn his forgiveness by his future works, Henchard's behavior toward women continues to be manipulative and proprietary. He deceives Elizabeth Jane in the uncomfortable masquerade of the second courtship; he has not sufficient respect for Susan to follow her instructions in her letter about her daughter's true parentage. When he wants Lucetta to marry him he threatens to

blackmail her, when he wants to get rid of Elizabeth Jane he makes her a small allowance. He trades in women, with dictatorial letters to Farfrae and lies to Newson, with an ego that is alive only to its own excited claims.'

(Draper R. P., P 146-151)

The character of Lucetta has been drawn in greater detail than Susan. What destroys Lucetta are the attitudes of society. Lucetta is the second woman Henchard was wronged. Unlike Susan, Lucetta is clever, diplomatic, and well – bred. But Elizabeth Jane is different from Susan and Lucetta. She is free from vanity and fickleness. She is indeed different from Bathsheba and Eustacia Vye. She is ill-educated and without any accomplishment. She is painfully aware of this deficiency in herself – “If they only knew what an unfinished girl I am”, she said, “that I can't talk Italian or use globes or, show any of the accomplishments they learn at boarding –schools, how they would despise me?'

(The M.of. C., Ch XV, P 26)

Elizabeth Jane is not subjected to the public ridicule and mistreatment. While Susan is weak, meek, voiceless, noiseless and passive, Elizabeth is spontaneous, active and conscious about her rights.

Hardy sympathizes with Susan's simplicity and ignorance. But he condemns the docile nature of Susan and her attitude toward her husband. Hardy focuses that the passivity of the woman is the main obstacle to women's progress.

The characteristics of Susan can be likened to Chandara because even she does not reveal the name of the murderer of Radha in the short story “Punishment” by RabindranathTagore, Susan also does not reveal the maltreatment of her husband when he becomes a mayor. In the same way, the characteristics of Susan match with Hestor Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Thus the novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge* by Thomas Hardy deals with the reality that is derived from contemporary experience but is conditioned by the imaginative resourcefulness adumbrating a semi-fictional realm, that of Wessex. In the modern society, women have more rights and can speak up for themselves. In present India, we consider that women are self – sufficient, more forward and more free, but till now in rural areas of India, the wretchedness condition of women such as wife – selling scene can be found. I personally experienced such wife – selling incidents even in our hometown, Malda. In this modern age, we find such incidents as we find in the novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. This is what makes me like the story of the novel.

Hardy's women sensibility can also be found in the novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Hardy has named Tess as a 'pure woman' and also as a 'standard woman'. Tess undoubtedly possesses purity of the spirit. Tess morals are of the mind as well as of the heart. Henry Charles Duffin says about Tess, 'She is moral as any prude, her behavior, her thoughts, her desires on all perilous occasions – with D'Urbervilles, early and late, with Clare, with her other admirers – are unimpeachable, considered from the most critical code and point of view. Moreover, her shame and remorse are infinite. She has the conscience that is quite amazing in view of the probability that conscience is almost entirely a matter of what one has been taught in very early childhood. 'Hardy says about Tess that 'there was something of the habitude of the wild animal in the unreflecting instinct with which she wandered on from place to place' but then, she had at the same time most rare and delightful mental qualities. She has splendid faith in Clare, she never feels – guilty of having wronged any creature on earth. Through the presentation of Tess's character, Hardy criticizes the double moral standards and the concept of female sexual purity prevalent in the society.

Hardy's feminist bent of mind can be found in the delineation of the character of Bathsheba in *Far From the Madding Crowd*. Bathsheba is a distressing picture of feminine folly. Troy, a dandy character in the novel, betrays both Bathsheba and Fanny. Bathsheba is indeed very true to life in the sense that most women are frail and foolish like her. Jealousy is the cause of ruin in the case of both Bathsheba and Sue. Bathsheba marries Troy secretly because Troy tells her a lie that he has seen a more beautiful girl than Bathsheba. Barnard Shaw would interpret Bathsheba's weakness for Troy as the urge of the 'Life Force' in her which seeks to swallow and consume altogether any young man whoever comes before that 'Life Force'. Henry Charles Duffin remarks about Bathsheba, "There is nothing subtle or wonderful in Bathsheba's nature. She is more commonplace than any of the four women Tess, Sue, Elfriede, and Eustacia, even Elfriede has the inexplicable charm of a dainty Caroline lyrics, Bathsheba is prose, and pedestrian at that. Yet she is a fine character, and Hardy certainly thought her worth studying. Indeed, he was enthusiastic enough about her to call her an Elizabeth in the brain and a Mary Stuart in spirit. She is a little overshadowed by some among her company, but she gains beauty from the tale of which she is the center. One gathers, moreover, that the book shows her only in this workshop, undergoing the probation of pain that is to make her the woman she is meant to be, the worthy mate of Gabriel Oak. One fancies her, in an imaginary sequel, clothed in the sunset hues of graver wisdom, a saner sufferer in love, and a staunch comradeship that is fore-shadowed in the scene of the corn-stacks'.

In *Jude the Obscure* we find the desperation between flesh and spirit. Sue, the heroine of the novel, believes in marriage without sex union, because she believes in platonic affection. Barnard Shaw like Hardy has suggested that spiritual marriage is possible and it should be distinguished from physical marriage in the sense that the one means a spiritual necessity while the other is a biological necessity. While painting the character of Sue, Hardy probably had in his mind the many complications of modern sex – relations. When Jude declares that Sue is a bodiless creature with very little animal passion in her, Sue answers him 'I am not so exceptional a woman as you think. Fewer women like marriage than you suppose, only they enter into it for the dignity it is assumed to confer.' A short conversation between Jude and Sue is given below:

'But surely you loved me?'

'Yes. But I wanted to let it stop there, and go on always as mere lovers; until –

'But people in love couldn't live forever like that!'

'Women could, men can't because they won't. An average woman is in this superior to an average man – that she never instigates, only responds. We ought to have lived in mental communication and no more.'

From the psychological point of view, Hardy's creation of a sexless character like Sue is rather a little strange and striking. Henry Charles Duffin says in this connection : "Sue herself denies that the attribute goes deep enough to warrant her being called 'cold and sexless' and here she seems to show the self – knowledge we should expect of her, for her relations with Jude exhibit no absence of any but the most primitive form of sex. She was certainly of the late developing type, in direct contradiction to Tess. And one may pause to wonder at the creative insight that enabled Hardy to handle these two opposed types with equal sympathy, understanding, and conviction.'

Sue becomes the spokesperson of the author. She denies the conventional idea of marriage. Through her Hardy questions – why marriage should spoil the freedom of the individual?

Hardy's profound sympathy for the suffering of Victorian women in the patriarchal society is sufficient to demonstrate his feminist stance and interest in women's causes. Hardy saw life as a very hard school, and if the woman suffers more than the man, it may be because a woman is the weaker vessel. The pathetic deficiency seems to have come home to him with appalling force, and his ruthless pictures of woman's folly and suffering are the bitter cry wrung from him by grief. It is not Hardy who treats his women cruelly but life as Hardy saw it. What Hardy could do for the women he did, he made them full of beauty, interest, fascinating and lovable qualities of all kinds, he gave them great parts to play, and let them 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 ideas of her as a creature nobly planned and bright with angelic radiance but knows also that it is only in rare cases that are found free, undimmed, ideal.

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