

**THE PROHETIC VISION FOR AN EMANCIPATED WOMAN: A
GYNOCENTRIC STUDY OF THE SELECT NOVELS OF
THOMAS HARDY**

Jayapragash J.

Research Scholar, Bharathiar University,
Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu

Dr. A. Subramanian

Associate Professor of English,
Jeppiar Institute of Technology
Chennai, Tamil Nadu

Abstract

Born in an era when women's roles in society were strictly defined and every attempt by women to deviate from the socially accepted double moral standards in the patriarchal society was suppressed, Thomas Hardy daringly attempted to delineate the women characters especially his heroines in such a way that they had the ability and determination to cross the limits demarcated by the society. Hardy's heroines intrigue the readers specifically because they neither fall into the popular image of their time - meek and submissive nor they fit the category of a fallen woman. His heroines are morally strong and unconventional and therefore spend much of their lives struggling against the restrictions imposed on them by the society. His female characters possess an impressive degree of physical agility and fitness quite contrary to the feminine delicacy and inactivity encouraged by their society. This paper attempts to throw light on the fact that Hardy had already sown the seeds for the emancipation of women from the dominant mores and codes and the gradual shift of his stance from feminine to feminist as his art developed.

Key words: unconventional, feminine delicacy, emancipation, demarcation.

The most predominant characteristics of Hardy's work is the dominance of women characters in his fiction. His compassion for women lies in the emotional rendering of their sufferings in the society passing through the transitional phase from conventionalism to modernity. In his novels he dealt with the issues pertaining to women with great energy and freedom. He also earned the notoriety of being New Woman novelist for his women characters crossing the limits demarcated by the society. It is observed that tragedy in his novels is associated with the fate of the individuals revolting against the society's conventional standards of behaviour. Women in his novels persistently strive to achieve self fulfilment in the society deeply entrenched in the Victorian concept of male superiority and female submission.

His novels are romantic stories, dealing with the relationship between the two sexes. These relations are not only marred by the internal jealousies and rivalries, class differences and economic circumstances but also by the various gender based concepts and ideologies of the society. A close analysis of Hardy's novels from the perspective of his presentation of the major women characters and his attitudes to the issues concerning women and their liberation reveals a steady growth in his outlook from a feminine to a feminist stance. There is a long, traceable path of rebellious women characters in Hardy's novels; those characters seem to conflict with the world. They are not wilfully so, there is simply something in their nature that makes it impossible for them to fit. It is also worth noting that the author never seems to condemn his characters' inability to conform; on the contrary, he sides with them and rather puts the blame for their actions on the rigidity of the contemporary conventions. Also, Hardy's women are strong willed, self assured and independent and therefore attempt to challenge their social position and fight the cultural laws of their time.

Bathsheba Everdene, the heroine of the novel *Far From the Madding Crowd* is shown blushing to herself in a hand mirror as she is surreptitiously watched by Gabriel Oak. She is too unconventional and independent in the man-made and man-run society. Throughout the novel she proves to be self-sufficient and clever enough to be completely independent as a single woman farmer even though she meets with discouragement where ever she goes: "All will be ruined, and ourselves too. A headstrong maid, that's what she is – and won't listen to no advice at all. Pride and vanity have ruined many a cobbler's dog." (*FFMC*, 104). In the eyes of the work folk, she is condemned to fail in her attempt even before starting to take care of the farm because in trying to be independent, self assured and self sufficient, she is 'offending against contemporary values.' She is attempting to seize a position which is in their minds inherently connected with a male dominion. Even her faithful friend and helper Gabriel Oak is sceptical about her ability to succeed in her endeavour: "How would the farm go on with nobody to mind it but a woman?" (*FFMC*, 184).

Even though the whole society around Bathsheba tells her that as a woman, she cannot succeed as a farmer, she actually contradicts this proposition by being quite successful in her trying. She manages the farm, goes to the corn market and she is able to perform all the duties of a farmer with the same capabilities of a man. As a supervisor of the farm, she displays a remarkable degree of composure in dealing with the men folks and warns them not to underestimate her because she is a woman. Her mental discipline combined with her physical energy is nothing short of a hard task master. "I shall be up before you are awake; I shall be afield before you are up; and I shall have breakfasted before you are afield. In short I shall astonish you all." (*FFMC*, 133). There are many instances where Bathsheba has been associated with wild creatures signifying the uncontrolled energy and rebelliousness to the conventions. During her horse riding, she is compared to a kingfisher for the 'rapidity of her glide and a hawk for its noiselessness.' When in anger she seems to be a 'caged leopard'. This is enough to prove that Bathsheba stands out of the type of women whose conformity to the stereotyped image makes them socially acceptable.

Elizabeth Jane in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is reflective, resilient, sagacious and shrewd. In fact she becomes a spokes person of Hardy's philosophy. The sobriety of her appearance is well in proportion with the sobriety and seriousness of her mind. Despite the various mentally agonising situations she undergoes in her life, she with her 'serene Minerva eyes' shows a remarkable degree of interest in learning and studying books. Hardy tells us how she substitutes a feeling of depression with a positive act of enriching herself with knowledge

and learning. Unlike a traditional woman of her time who would sob and grieve over the mundane existence, she is portrayed as an embodiment of a modern woman who has the ability to transform the plight of her living through self learning. Even Henchard is impressed on finding in her room books, maps and sketches.

Jane's practical approach to life leading to the self-integration of her personality is what ensures her survival through many odds in life. Unlike Henchard and Lucetta, her tendencies are not to destroy herself rather to gather it in a positive manner. At Henchard's large house in her newly gained prosperity, her indulgence lies not in buying expensive clothes and dressing herself in fineries as other girls would have done in her kind of circumstances. At the face of roughness on the part of Henchard and Lucetta, she does not allow herself to be broken but takes on her own way in a dignified manner. Elizabeth Jane's philosophy is not of the sacrifice of self but of the preservation of self by making it the least vulnerable. It does not mean submission or negation but learning from the experience and keeping one's eyes open to reality so as to develop a positive attitude.

It is very obvious that Hardy had very advanced views about women. In his novels, he has always expressed his distrust with the artificial values of society that curb women's freedom as individuals. Through the portrayal of his women characters he has exposed the conventional thoughts that widened the difference between men and women. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Hardy expressed his idea of female purity that had its narrow definition in the sexual purity of women. By calling Tess, a pure woman, Hardy challenged the Victorian social and literary convention, which held the belief in the irretrievability of the female virtue. Sexual fall of Tess does not make her dishonourable in Hardy's eyes. He believed that a woman, who is morally pure, sexual lapse in her, which is not in the nature of a coquette, is of no importance. One of the reasons why the scene of Tess's seduction is laconically or not at all presented could be because Hardy never attached importance to it. Hardy here was touching an important aspect of women's emancipation. He argues against the society's discrimination against the sexually fallen woman.

The truth Hardy wished to speak was that of injustice meted out to women as regard to the idea of sexual morality. The very act that leaves Alec free becomes a social stigma for Tess only because she is a woman. Tess has been condemned by critics for the passivity of her behaviour indicated during the crucial events of her life beginning with the death of her horse Prince to her own death by hanging. Her passivity which is the result of her upbringing, should not lead one into ignoring the moments when she asserts or tries to establish her individuality. Unlike the women of the Victorian Age who were expected to be succumbing to the cultural laws and male's supremacy, Tess registers her protest against the male misreading of hers in the novel. To Alec's male clinch 'that's what every woman says', she stands against the generality of the feminine behaviour. And later after Angel's desertion, she reacts against Alec's unreasonable behaviour in a race act of courage when she passionately hurls the glove by the gauntlet, 'heavy and thick as a warrior's' (*Tess*, 411) directly in his face so that the blood starts oozing from his mouth. This takes us to her final act of Alec's murder, an act of lodging her anger against the system and misreading.

Even with Angel Clare, when he calls her by the name of pagan goddesses, her discomfiture is clear. She tells him to call her Tess. Again when Angel categorizes her in the peasant category after her confession on the wedding night she retorts, 'I am only a peasant by position not by nature.' (*Tess*: 302). Tess is seen rebelling against her female archetypal roles when she turns from virgin to unmarried mother and from deserted wife to a mistress. After her desertion by Angel, she does not remain the tragic sufferer for long. She returns to Alec and in

her last letter to Clare finally turns on him: O' why have you treated me so monstrously, Angel! I have thought it all over carefully, and I can, never, never forgive you!...(Tess:440). When Angel returns, Alec's murder is the only way left for her to break the mesh of circumstances that bind her. This is her triumph and establishment of individuality. Tess becomes victim of the misreading by the male characters who fail to recognize her as she is. To Alec, she is like 'every woman' representing flesh. To Angel, she is a pure woman turned impure by her sexual fall. Thus Hardy attacked the patriarchal sexual ideologies cringing the lives of women by showing his overt sympathy for the female victims.

Writing towards the end of the nineteenth century, Hardy appeared to be ahead of his time in several aspects, especially in anticipating the breakdown of the laws regarding sexual identity. His passionate female character, therefore excited vehement criticism from conservative Victorian readers who were unprepared for his vision of the changing role of women. The novels chosen for study clearly expose the prophetic vision that Hardy had for the emancipation of women.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

Far From the Madding Crowd. London: Penguin, 1994

The Mayor of Casterbridge. New York: The New American Library Inc., 1962

Tess of the D'Urbervilles. London: Penguin, 1985

Secondary Sources

Bagchi, Jasodhara (Ed.) *Literature, Society and Ideology in the Victorian Era*. New Delhi: Sterling, 1991.

Boumelha, Penny. *Thomas Hardy and Women: Sexual Ideology and Narrative Form*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982.

Kaur, Manjit. *The Feminist Sensibility in the Novels of Thomas Hardy*. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2005.

Morgan, Rosemarie. *Women and Sexuality in the Novels of Thomas Hardy*. London: Routledge, 1988.