

## **SELF ASSERTION AGAINST CULTURED CONFORMITY IN HARDY'S HEROINES**

**SHWETA CHAUDHRY**  
Research Scholar  
DCRUST, MURTHAL

### **Abstract**

Thomas Hardy was a Victorian novelist who vehemently voiced against a kind of conformity cultured in his female protagonists, in his novels, with such an effusiveness that his heroines are broadly divided in two categories- one who patiently like dumb, driven cattle accept affection, variations and inflections as unopposed destiny and the other who swim against the current; try to propagate their choice; register their idea and presence too, in the annals of history. The second category accept the challenge of society offered to them, in particular and to womanhood, in general to prove that they, being human and individual, possess reason and intellectual capabilities equal to or more than their male counterparts, if bestowed with an opportunity to unfurl their potential and leave their imprints on the soil of time.

Women of this second category wade through tumultuous water and confront sheer opposition of society as their choice of independence; their priority to identity and virtue over beauty; their craving more for accomplishment and less for embellishment. A heavy price they have to pay for throwing gauntlet to society as their strife for an identity other than that of husband or father is assumed and presumed as a whim or digression, wantonness also or maybe, a presumptuous gesture to, deliberately, invite displeasure of age-old, conventional patriarchy who has decreed only household chores and childcare for a woman as a binding on her to accept this doctrine without suggestion, question or query.

Very objectively, Hardy showcases, rather juxtaposes the two categories portraying how docile and conforming women endlessly suffer, of course are credited with sympathy and consolation from society. Conversely, how independent and self-aware women also suffer due to cultured conformity which renders a handicap in them during their infantile training by not enabling them to decide in cold blood, judiciously too; to carve out a niche for them, developing their own potential. In absence of regulation or regimen, a monitory system or a mentor to guide them in their struggle; they, haphazardly, take a flight from the stifling situation, they are thrown into, but with weak wings of poor judgement and no itinerary to follow, they fail to gauge where to land and how to make a successful landing.

## INTRODUCTION:

Victorian age which was, otherwise, tough on women finds in Thomas Hardy a precursor of the feminist movement. The prefatory remarks in the abstract observe cultured conformity in self-aware and aspiring women as a handicap, inculcated in them as a well-thought-out strategy to render them unfit for waging a successful struggle against conventionality. Conformity to doctrines of society, a patriarchal agency, that assigns a secondary status to woman marginalising her to periphery of society, affirming her exclusion from mainstream of society, is cultured, cultivated in females as an infantile training making their subconscious mind receptive of it, making them vulnerable, fear their fate in case they go against dogmas and dictates of society.

Hardy in all his novels registers 'the cry' of a woman for independence, to take a flight against what is unpalatable to her but the flight is uncharted in absence of education, worldly wisdom, nevertheless, the stiff air resistance of domestic and social forces doesn't allow her a safe landing and pushes her into oblivion. Hardy's mother and sister posited a powerful intellectual impression on him, because of his mother's inspiration, he developed a zeal for self education and he drew upon knowledge of his sister Mary. This mesmerising intellectual halo of womanhood motivated him to think that women should be intellectually accomplished than gaudily embellished. This positive feminine influence found a strong literary expression in his novels. He presented woman's sentiments, urges and choices in countless manifestation with assorted ingredients. Elaboration and expostulation on novels of Hardy one after other will reaffirm and strengthen the aforementioned conviction.

Hardy's first novel *Desperate Remedies* showcases two women: Miss Aldclyffe and Cytherea. The former is known as wicked, ill tempered and victim of severe emotional repression. She is juxtaposed with Cytherea - who enjoys a complexity born out of her self awareness of inner virtues denied to the conventional heroine. Hardy, here deliberates upon the relentless struggle and endeavour of woman to transcend, to elevate and evolve her to self actualisation with no intention to drag men into the realm of immanence restricting his growth; her disappointment lies in the fact that such virtues and liberty to make inroads in male bastions force her to contend the imposition and restraint and undoubtedly, the disapproval of patriarchy. She feels multiple and myriad pressure of social institution, contract of marriage and social sanction.

In *Under the Greenwood Tree*, here, the heroine Fancy Day harbours an air of superiority in her heart. She is definitely, unlike other selfish and faithless women who seek gratification from Dick Dewy, an honest eligible suitor for Fancy. The novel suggests, on the surface, that Fancy Day wants to marry a person who shares her temperament but ends up with a person of her father's choice. Here, her privileged upbringing, her father uses as a pretence of external good breeding for his social escalation by matrimonial alliance of his daughter with a high profile groom. She is educated to gain some maturity and develop the ideology of her own but she, too, succumbs to the cultured conformity, her father had inculcated in her since infancy i.e. to use education, refinement in taste not for self growth but to lure people of high social position. This practical and utilitarian approach keeps her disturbed throughout her life and she instead of using, fully utilising her higher education for intellectual enhancement, misuses it as a false show, a mask to attract people of high social importance like Parson Maybold; but disillusioned, she settles down in matrimony with Dick having, withinnumerable unopened buds that will perish unfurled'.

In *A Pair of Blue Eyes* Elfride, the heroine suffers a trial of disappointment and disillusionment by her harmless but wilful flirtation. Right from her connectivity with Felix

Jethway, Stephen Smith, Henry Knight, she is caught in the toils of pretence generated from a general concern of maintaining external appearance. Her personal feelings are so deeply constrained by conventions and consequent fears that she hides truth from Henry Knight, her suitor. Knight also inexorably raises the stakes to announce that he prioritise a truthful soul like heaven's light in a woman. This burden of confession with related, apprehended doubts and fears accumulates and weighs so heavily on her conscience that she marries widowed Lord Luxellian to die in pregnancy.

She was conditioned to cultured conformity to social doctrine in her infancy in such a way that she assumes her funful, playful flirtation as a sin committed to soul and decides on her own that she deserves no pure suitor like Knight and Stephen, without knowing even their purity. Her infantile training credits purity only to female's share, man are beyond the realm of such expectations. Her fabrication about denouement forces her to take hasty and idiotic decision to marry a widowed person. Elfride earns sympathy of readers as a collateral effect of simmering anger for Knight's jealousy and his selfishness beating Elfride into coercion by repressive conventionality.

In 'Far from Madding Crowd', Bathsheba is aspired in matrimony by Gabriel Oak- an upright and honest person with great resourcefulness; by William Boldwood- a person of impulse who can fly to rage for trifles; by Troy, a traditional soldier having great charm and aura to lure Bathsheba. Hardy showcases how Bathsheba governed by an irresistible temptation for charm of Troy, makes folly to opt for Troy and invites misery on her. In this novel, Hardy makes his expectation from fair sex crystal clear as Bathsheba is mentioned as : *There was a bright air and manner about her, by which she seemed to imply that the desirability of her existence couldn't be questioned.*[P 35, Hardy]Her vanity is her vulnerability which Troy twists to his advantage and cash in on her non-conformist attitude.

No doubt, Bathsheba is not purely conventional but she possesses no specified individuality and independence of spirit to rightly decide for herself. Ultimately she corrects herself, with exposure and experience with the world and makes a good choice for Gabriel Oak. Fanny Robin is juxtaposed with Bathsheba to project how affection, tenderness and innocence are in one way, virtues of a woman but if misplaced for a rogue, invite upon her the fury of reason, decreeing ruin for her.

"The Hand of Ethelberta" voices the sentiments of author against unfair privileges, pretension and advantage. Here, Hardy projects upper class devolving the deprived lower strata of society. Ethelberta is not in pursuit of a wholesome and idealistic life much to her taste but strikes a foolish compromise in name of her family, maybe, for acquisition of rank, status and wealth using matrimony as a ladder; she is disillusioned with her choice, her error of judgement. Instead of developing her own skills of survival, she banks on matrimony to earn her social elevation, unfortunately this erroneous step ends up in failure.

"The Return of The Native" augurs well with Hardy's imagination. It assuages the pessimistic streaks and allows Hardy to attain a transcendental level where he animates his characters with acquired attributes. Eustacia Rye is presented as most flamboyant personality. Hardy is startled and dazzled by her but in manners not in intellect. He quotes:Eustacia was the raw material of divinity... *She had the passion and instinct which make a model goddess, that is, those make not quite a model woman.*[p63 Hardy]Hardy finds in her an extreme craving for unlimited love. She fails to domesticate herself but settles down in matrimony. Wildeve being erratic and fitful, poses intimidation to her calm water of life. Thomasin is described as opposed

to Eustacia, as the former accepts sheepishly the authority of her husband, his infidelity too, whereas Eustachian maintains her own say.

Hardy condemns reticence, dependence and conventionality of Thomasin and blames her for her misery as he feels passivity as a major hindrance to progress. Hardy's relentless fight for women espouses their cause and vehemently opposes their marginalised status, societal presentation of their inessential being.

In *The Trumpet Major*, the heroine, Anne's choice for an unsuitable suitor exhibits her innocent but unreasonable character. Her preferential treatment for impulse over reason leads to emotional disruption. She doesn't evolve or grow through experience. Her fluctuating decisions leave no perceptible mark on her choice in future. Her shallow preference for dashing presentability, her perversity to emotional sterility and callousness leads her to oblivion.

In *A Laodicean*, Paula Power uses her education as an experiment and shows no sign of commitment in relationship, whereas Anne is too full to be appreciated, Paula is free from submissiveness or frigidity but very cold in her response. Her oscillation between traditional and modern outlook; conformity and nonconformity, her uncompromising bent of mind, surely, raises complexity in her life.

*Two on a Tower* portrays lady Constantine a lovely, lovesick lady who finds true love in Swithin, a young boy having his first passion for intellectual pursuits. She lets him go for his aspirations but marries Bishop of Melcheste. Lady Constantine, as Hardy suggests, rebels the conventional mode of her life, i.e., widowhood but her poor sense of judgement, romantic deviation assign no good future to her and she succumbs to her own failures and loses life. Hardy showcases how lack of education or guidance misleads women to oblivion.

In *The Mayor of Castenbridge*, Hardy also projects rebellion, undue suffering, desertion on the part of woman. Woman subjection is clear in the very opening of novel when Susan is sold off, under the effect of intoxication, by her own husband and she accepts her fate so meekly that she raises no objection, not to speak of violence. Hardy can not resist the psychoanalysis of such a sale which unearths how man has a vicious longing to toy with wife as a commodity and his belonging like other disposable and saleable items of household and also to get rid of her as a burden. A male assertion accompanied with a virile decision not only to desert her but also to make sure that she should not come back to him; then after Michael Henchard here represents patriarchal mindset which entices him to shake off wife as a drooping rag with passivity and muteness on her part; not just by abandoning her but by selling her off as an animal, stripping her of any grace or virtue, human attributes.

Hardy opens his novel with such idea that insidiously lures man's fantasy; It also come to fore how woman's passivity and lack of self-awareness lead her to dangerous circumstances. With projection of Henchard wielding male authority and enthusiasm Hardy's critics have credited the novel a male-document and, desirably, ignored the trajectory of Henchard's life after he severed all bonds with the community of women and committed himself to male code of money and honour and terribly stripped himself of everything at last. Susan, Lucetta, Elizabeth Zane all suffer due to their own choices for life; Zane emerges successful as his passion and preferences are well-directed by her.

In *The Woodlander*, Hardy argues that women can also decide in their favour and to their advantage provided they are facilitated in a way men, generally, are. Grace Melbury chooses Dr. Fitzpier over Giles Winterbourne and is condemned to live a life of hell with a philanderer as divorce law in Victorian age were in favour of man. Mary South is also a person of promising potential but fails to fulfil her dreams and aspirations less because of her passivity, more because



of her upbringing to play the role of a receiver whatever may befall her. Mary expresses her dilemma before Grace in the following lines-“... *One thing he never spoke of to me was love nor I to him* ( p400,Hardy)”

This lack of expression, Hardy condemns most in his novel. Conventional Mr. Melbury put the future of his daughter Grace Melbury for his admiration of upper class and its superior refinement and favours Dr. Fitzpiers of gentle birth over Mr. Cules. Hardy brings in irony in conduct of Dr. Fitzpies, who separates himself, as a gentry from toiling middle class but indulges in an affair with a village girl- Suke Damson. Mrs. Charmond, too, belongs to upper crest of society is described by Hardy as a creature of strange smouldering erratic passions- *kept down like a stifled conflagration but bursting out now here, now there.*”[ch,27 Hardy]

She is defined as a woman of perversities, full of sarcasm, delighting in piquant distasteful contrasts. Her mysterious credentials give her a cover-up against public derision and she maintains her whims and eccentricities and affair too with an enigma around her.

Hardy here makes clear that women who are innocent and without backing suffer the most, an affluent deviants, like Mrs. Charmond, go unnoticed. Mrs. Charmond was never ashamed of her post conduct as conventionality, her rank were in her favour and she was never 'fathomed' by honest minds of Hintock. Hardy makes clear that women supported by family or status despite their otherwise deviant behaviour aren't assessed on terms and conditions of conventionality as in case of Mrs. Charmond.

Hardy's most pessimistic novel Tess of the D'urbervilles portrays heroine Tess in great poignancy. Her misery erupts from conventional belief.

Hardy finds about her-“...*she was terrified without reason. It was they that were out of harmony with the actual world not she*(p 114,Hardy).

Tess's rebellion to kill Alec who victimized her beyond her tolerance and endurance is Hardy's finest conception of tragedy as here, the worthy is encompassed by inevitable. Tess shows readiness to accept blame and guilt and submits to evil desires of Alec; Hardy find this weakness of her the main cause of her suffering. Angel Clare, the one who should support her amidst her woes increases them manifold to desert her when she needs him the most. Family needs force Tess to join Alec as employer but the ruin of future, leaving Tess to nothingness enrages her to kill the person, a sole reason for her unhappiness. Hardy projects Tess' mother in villainous role. She should have guided her daughter for morality, for toughness but she, being impulsive and having a prudent eye for opportune time and situation exploits innocent nobility of Tess with her secretive and devious nature. Tess wants to confide in Angel her atrocities, her rape but her plans are thwarted either by chance or indecision. Both Angel and Tess have an ignoble past but Angel Clare practices double standard of morality and refuses to accept Tess with her dark past.

Hardy speaks from Tess – “ *I thought Angel, that you loved me- me my very self.*”[cp,3 Hardy]

Here, Hardy comes up with feminist ideals making Tess assert that her true identity lies in her, her own self, not in plundered Chastity, robbed her of by compulsion of circumstances.

In *Jude the Obscure* Hardy juxtaposes Arabella and Phillotson as conventional, tolerant and conformist. Entities like Jude and Sue are unconventional, rebellious and repugnant of social order. Hardy presents different standards of chastity and morality where moral uprightness requires reluctance of woman to be an active partner in illicit relationship.

Arabella is portrayed as lusty and worldly wise woman to offer a contrast to intellectually unorthodox Sue Bredehead. The tragic lives and death of Jude and Sue reverberate the tragedy of people who try to swim against turbulent current of conventionality.

The well Beloved discusses the theme of love and marriage. Hardy comes in clear defence of choice and priority of women when Pierston, the hero renounces his wish to marry Avice, the third and accepts Shrivelled Marcia who promises him not flesh but friendship. Hardy enacts a world in his Wessex where social inequity is prevalent and perpetual; he registers his repugnance over master-slave relationship of two genders. Snobbery and hypocrisy also emerge and remerge as social practices. Hardy wants his heroines to strengthen themselves but they chose superficiality and flippancy, requiring chivalry by men at expense of their propriety and self esteem.

**CONCLUSION:**

Hardy beautifully presents his ideology in favour of women ; he does not recommend secondary status to women as it will come to a crescendo of lopsided development of society. He gives a perfect lay out of efforts , bent of mind of fair sex who constantly strikes , strives and survives the onslaughts of male hegemony which they , somehow, have never earned or deserved. He also opines that they severely lack in training or education to make any grave or substantial decision to kickstart any successful insurrection against the prevalent scheme of society. The absence of a sane and judicious mentor, especially and preferably a mother, marshals them to oblivion, usher them into impervious , incognizant realms of ravage , rage and ruination.

He expostulates how their rebellion against conventions results into a fiasco as they have enjoyed no premium privilege of education or training, right from infancy to decide for themselves or how to take on challenges of life; moreover, a cultured conformity instilled in them, as a part of infantile training of a girl, to conform to social conventions strikes such fear in their heart that leads them to oblivion, to nowhere. They have learnt no knowledge from their mentor about how to conduct life in face of challenges and what to do when that male support which they were conditioned to lean on, is of no avail. Trying a new venture, strengthened with individual innovation for autonomy they earn, in absence of guidance and wise mentorship, bitter and maybe, terrible experiences in which some of them succumb, as a sign of weakness, with error of judgement, to unavoidable and disastrous circumstances as Fanny Robin in “ Far From The Madding Crowd”.

**Workcited**

- Banks, O. 1981. *Faces of Feminism: A Study of Feminism as a Social Movement*. New York: St. Martin Press.
- Allen, W. 1958. *The English Novel* London: Penguin.
- Barret, A., ed. 1992. *Women’s Writing in Middle English*. London: Longman.
- Boumelha, P. 1982. *Thomas Hardy and Woman*. Great Britain: The Harvester Press.
- Brody, M. 1983. *Mary Wollstonecraft’s Sexuality and women’s Right* in D. Spender, ed. *Feminist Theorists*.
- De Beauvoir, S. 1988. *The Second Sex*. Britain: Picador.
- Eagleton, M., ed. 1986. *Feminist Literary Theory*. U.K: Blackwell.
- Miles, R. 1979. *The Woman of Wessex* in A. Smith.
- Mitchell, J, 1974. *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*. New York: vintage.
- Friedan, B. 1963. *The Feminine Mystique*. U.K.: Penguin.
- Hands, T. 1989. *Thomas Hardy: Distracted Preacher?* London: Macmillan
- Johar, D. 1995. *Image of Women*. Udaipur: Shiva
- Langland E. 1980. “A Perspective of One’s Own: Thomas Hardy and the Elusive Sue Bridehead,” *Studies in the Novel*, 12, 12-28.