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Hardy as Misogynist: Analysis of Tess of the D'Urbervilles

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Abstract

It is very easy to repudiate Thomas Hardy as an anti-feminist or misogynist but he was a product of the nineteenth century and could not remain detached from the contemporary social circumstances. The reasons for creating tragic characters like Tess, Sue, and Susan might be inherent in the theory of literature he believes in. He seems to believe in 'Art for the sake of life' and that made him to present the picture of the society which is deviating from the ideals, code, and ethical norms. Hardy has designed 'tragic fate' for such unconventional feminist, in the form of an indirect threat 'be good or die'. Although his heroines are liberated but he made them suffer for their unconventionality which implies that he does not like women violating the honor of conventional society. It was the most significant reason due to which Hardy proved himself as an anti-feminist writer. Textual interpretation of some of his novels determines the fact that Hardy has used his novels as a medium to propagate his philosophy concerning the norms and code of conduct for Victorian women.

Key words: Victorian, anti-feminist, conventional, codes, norms, women

Twenty- first century is marked apart from the previous two centuries in terms of literary criticism as it implies emphasis on the application of feminist discourse for the interpretation of literature. The theory rips apart the conventional biases and prejudices rampant in literature, which despite all the technological advancement, is still deeply patriarchal in nature. Feminist discourse exposes the double standards of the society with different sets of norms and codes of conduct for men and women. This wide difference between both tears apart the concept of gender equality and as the literature reflects the societal trends, many celebrated writers of the last two centuries have perpetuated this gender discrimination, without ever

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realizing by portrayal of weak, submissive, passive women they are in a way, degrading the image of women in society. The present paper focuses on the most celebrated novel by Thomas Hardy, *Test of the D'Urbervilles* and its analysis presents Hardy as a misogynist through and through.

The principal objective of feminist discourse is "to expose, not to perpetuate, patriarchal practices."(Moi 1984 xiv) The very word 'patriarchy' implies and adheres to the social norms and the rules of patriarchal hegemony with men as pivot of the society and women on the periphery. It "which enables men to dominate women in all relations is known in feminist discourse as patriarchy"(Ruthven 1984: 1). The system allows men to dominate and suppress women and its perpetuation since centuries has made it completely invisible as most of the time women don't even realize their oppression and fail to raise their voice.

The difference between the terms 'sex' and 'gender' is what makes all the difference. Sex is a biological construct while gender is socially imposed. It is in this context that Simone de Beauvoir argues, "one is not born but rather becomes a woman." (Beauvoir 1953: 267)The societal norms always differ for men and women as both are expected to play different roles. The roles segregation and confining women to non-productive, passive, submissive and supporting roles generate gender inequality. The society governed by patriarchy perpetuates gender inequality based on "men's domination over each other is central to men's domination over women ".(Walby 1990: 20)Patriarchal culture and consequent gender-inequality gives unlawful power to men. Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* with Tess as the chief protagonist deeply seeps in with ample examples of this male dominance over women.

Through her character, Hardy has displayed the ideology that women must not violate the established social norms. Tess was molested by Alec, her cousin and gives birth to his son who soon died of sickness. Then she got married to Angle Clare and when she confessed her horrible agony to her husband, she was at once abandoned by him for the loss of virginity. Ironically he himself was not chaste as he had romantic relation in past. But purity and chastity not demanded from men, he consciously remains clear. In absence of any formal education, her dismal condition and the financial burden of the family compelled her to reunite with Alec, her seducer. When Angel, her husband returned with the intentions to accept her back, Tess, thinking Alec responsible for all her problems stabs him, in her fury.

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She was given capital punishment for this murder. As patriarchal system completely ignored every tyranny and sins committed by men. For instance, Alec did not undergo any punishment for raping a minor; he was rather welcomed as a missionary by the society. Angel, demanded chastity from Tess whereas he ignores his own adulterous past. The act of inflicting punishment on Tess indicates that as a woman, she is being treated as an object and not as equal to men. This rejection exposes the contemporary Victorian society with double standards as men were allowed to enjoy sexual relationship even outside wedlock whereas a single mistake from a woman was fatal. Women were:

Confined ... in cages like the feathered race, they have nothing to do but to plume themselves, and stalk with mock majesty from perch to perch. It is true they are provided with food and raiment, for which they neither toil nor spin; but health, liberty, and virtue are given in exchange.⁵ (Wollstonecraft 1992: xxxvii)

Hardy used his work as a medium to educate women the code of conduct which he does not deem important for men. Ironically women are being depicted simultaneously as a source of carnal sex, born to tickle men and were expected them to be pure and chaste. He never blames the culprit (men) for having no control over their carnal desires but blame women for men's sexuality. Thus when virtue of honour make it proper to check a passion, the burden is thrown on the weaker shoulders, contrary to reason and true modesty, which at least should "render the self-denial mutual, to say nothing of the generosity of bravery, supposed to be a manly virtue."(Wollstonecraft 1992: 135)

In this way Hardy safeguards his sex and degrades women never treating them equally. "The male is only a male now and again, the female is always a female, or at least all her youth; everything reminds her of her sex; the performance of her function requires a special constitution."(Wollstonecraft 1992: xxxvii).

The patriarchal society codified women's responsibilities and to keep them out of completion in public life, men confined them into domestic chores. They were confined to the house-hold affairs and up to child bearing, rearing, and to satiate whims and fancies of their husbands. This confinement of women to domestic sphere checked their mental growth and reduced their social status as mere dependent on men who emerge as powerful, dominating and in commanding position because of their economic independence.

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Men treated themselves as superior to women and felt they had every prerogative to subdue women physically as well as mentally. Men were free and equal whereas women were deprived even of their fundamental rights in absence of gender equality. Tess was sexually harassed by Alec but neither she nor the society protested against him. Being a typical product of patriarchal society, she had no courage to openly revolt against a male belonging to upper strata of society.

Her molestation diminished her into a play-object. Tess's molestation- scene and her silent acceptance of Alec's sexuality show that Hardy does not consider women an independent individual with intellectual power and takes away the right from his women characters to discriminate between right and wrong. Hardy's "cynical pessimism and social realism"(Allingham) portrays women as passive victim, gets reflected in his novels. It is not as some critics opine, his sympathy with his female protagonist.

He just wants them to obey the orders of their patriarchs. Women were labeled as tamed beings ready to submit themselves to men's wishes totally incapable of resisting their tyrannical superiority. Mary Wollstonecraft argued forcefully that "women had the potential for full rationality and consequently were as capable as men of complete moral responsibility" (Jaggar 1983: 36) but women were not given equal rights, equal opportunities and equal education. Therefore, because of their ignorance they failed to perceive the injustice meted out to them by the society. This treatment as unequal beings indicates the biased division of the two sexes in patriarchy.

The nineteenth century can also be termed as a patriarchal society and women in it were defined by their obedience to authority and male sexuality. Women's blind obedience and their sexual harassment could be easily discerned in the works of Victorian writers. Thomas Hardy was one of those novelists, who, through his works, have outlined the essential traits of ideal women. As he himself was a product of the patriarchal society, the influence of patriarchy gets reflected in his novels. His heroines are generally weak, passive, obedient and have conventional features, which he believes, women must possess. He also depicted the tragic end of unconventional women in his novels, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *Jude the Obscure*, and *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. Through these works Hardy's main intention was to disseminate his ideas among women that their true happiness lies in performing the prescribed duties and maintaining the social decorum and, if they violate the conventional norms, they themselves are responsible for their tragic end.

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Tess of the D'Urbervilles is one of those novels of Hardy in which he has presented a New Woman and, because he did not like the idea of women's emancipation, he made her suffer for violating the codes of conduct. Hardy was a man who upheld the view that men are the superior in power matrix in the family as well as in society and because they hold supreme position and other family members must necessarily obey them. His vision is very much clear in the character of John Durbeyfield who was an alcoholic and irresponsible father. He had a desire to uplift his status and he wished to be financially sound but did not want to struggle hard to fulfill his aspirations. To get name, fame and wealth John Durbeyfield and his wife did not hesitate in sending their beautiful daughter to work as a domestic servant in an alien household. John Durbeyfield believed this one thing that "the father had the power to dispose of his daughter in marriage at his own will and pleasure, without any regard to hers, and it was practically impossible for the girl to refuse compliance if the father persevered". (Shihada 2001: 85) Here the use of a beautiful daughter by the parents and their actions reflect the real scenario of the nineteenth century England and Hardy's own views. Tess being a girl, was not valued as a human being but treated as a medium and an object whose beautiful appearance had the power to attract Alec, the rich man. Tess "hoped to be a teacher at the school" (Hardy 2002: 71) but her parents' foolish dreams discontinued her further studies. Hardy has expressed Tess's desire in his novel but he has also expressed his ideology that women have no right to aspire for independence; they must repress their desires and should live up to conventional moral standards of society. Though John Durbeyfield was the head of the family and it was his duty to bear the family responsibilities, Hardy shifted the onus of the family responsibility on Tess's shoulder to repress her hopes and aspirations. Betty Friedan explains "women need to work outside the home in order to develop a 'firm' core of self". Doane and Hodges 1987: 6) But Hardy's works bring him very much close to being a misogynist "because of his oppressive treatment of women." (Morgan 1990: 48) His suggestions also bring out his view that women should not express their feelings through writing or any other medium as their "artistic productions are tainted with the vices of amateurism and the mediocrity which corrupt taste and lower standards." (Boumelha 1982: 72)

Tess is projected by Hardy as an innocent and beautiful girl but these adjectives become the cause of her destruction. Innocence, passivity subservient attitude, beauty and tolerance cannot be called features or qualities in Hardy's heroines; rather they prove drawbacks for them. Tess's beauty attracted Alec and because of her innocent and submissive nature she failed to understand the resist Alec's advances and ultimately this proved fatal and changed her from an innocent virgin into an unwed mother.

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She was severely criticized by her parent and by the society for her seduction whereas the real culprit, Alec, remained scot-free. He was neither blamed by anybody nor did he undergo any punishment for his heinous crimes. The unjust laws of patriarchal society:

Enable men to subordinate and manipulate women. A passion for mastery results in the molestation or rape of whatever it subordinates: symbolically, it is a phallic activity, whether it is practiced by man who do it 'naturally', or by women who can be trained to do it in a patriarchal system of education. (Ruthvan 2)

From the feminist perspective Alec's act of establishing his supremacy over Tess reflects his ideology of regarding women physically weaker than men. It also implies that they are vulnerable creatures with their tender bodies and need male shelter for their protection. Through the depiction of Tess, Hardy indirectly gives cues that any effort of women to come out of the four walls of their house to establish their individual identity can prove very fatal as it happened in the case of Tess. Her seduction also propounds his belief that he considers women sexual objects only born to cater to the needs of men. Hardy makes his women "systematically voluptuous in order to become contentedly the slaves of casual lust Standing dishes to which every glutton may have access" (Wollstonecraft 1992:8).

This molestation reduced her to the status of a mere sexual object who was not even provided the right to raise her voice against Alec's tyranny and patriarchal society. Her silence shows that Hardy appreciated women to be dumb and mute. He believed that women's true happiness lies in maintaining silence, tolerance the obedience. Her molestation was a "male assertion of dominance over a weak, complaint and rather unintelligent female" (Millet 1971: 6). No doubt, Tess who was weak and compliant sacrificed her wishes and decided to work as housekeeper just to make her parents' dream come true, unfortunately she failed to understand her parents' trick. Does Hardy believe that women are completely deprived of common sense and fail to protect themselves?. After she was raped by Alec, her parents who should be her real supporter at this juncture called her names. Her father's false nobility did not allow him to call a person to baptize Tess' son when he was dying, so she baptized the baby herself. The society treated Tess as an outcast while Alec, the rapist was never questioned by the society. His conversion from a rapist into a missionary raises questions against Hardy and Victorian morality. Why does he hold two different opinions for both the sexes? Why does he believe the women's chastity is more important than men's? Why does he want ideal women and not ideal men for the society? Why does he not apply chastity in men's case?

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Why does he maintain gender-discrimination? And why does he not preach morality to his male characters? Why has he called Tess a fallen woman and not used the term fallen men for Alec and Angel? Hardy must understand that virtue should be applicable not only in women's case but also in men's. They should be taught "not only to respect modesty in women, but to acquire it themselves, as the only way to merit their esteem." (Wollstonecraft 8) In this connection Mirriam Schneir says according to Seneca's declaration: "that the same amount of virtue, delicacy and refinement of behaviour that is required of woman in the social state, should also be required of man, and the same transgression should be visited with equal severity on both man and woman." (Shihada 98-99) Hardy made Tess suffer not only at the hands of Alec and her parents but also those of Angel, her husband.

He has presented Angel as a young man of modern thoughts but his definitions of advanced and modern views are revealed at the very moment when this Young modern man rejected Tess for no fault of her own. By this rejection he also labeled her as a fallen woman. Angel who himself had spent two days with a stranger ignored his past and deserted her by saying "Oh! Tess, forgiveness does not apply to the case! You were one person; now you are another. My God -how can forgiveness meets such a grotesque - incident... as that" (Hardy 264) He considered his case as totally different and pardonable one because "he wasn't raped! And he considered his crime so much less than hers"! (Barry) The statement made by Angel shows that Hardy too believes that Tess was at fault and therefore she should not be condoned for her adultery. Tess's only fault lay in her poverty, submissive attitude, and her accommodating and slavish nature. Hardy has depicted all the traits of a weak woman in Tess. He made her suffer but still she did not raise her voice against Alec, Angel and the patriarchal society, which indicates that Hardy recognized women only as slaves whose prime duty should be to please men and tolerate every tyranny of their masters without uttering a single word.

Angel's pre-marital affair and his proposal to Izz Huett to live with him not as a wife but as his mistress shows that for him women were only objects and when his own wife was treated as an object by Alec, Angel failed to bear this insult. His wife's purity was essential but the virginity of Izz and others did not matter. Being a man of conventional society, he had a notion that:

A wife without any loss of caste Condone an act of adultery on the part of the husband but a husband could not condone a similar act on the part of wife, and for this among other reasons that the adultery of the wife might be the means of palming

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suspicious offspring on the husband while the adultery of husband could have no such effect with regard to the wife. (Shihada 98-99)

He failed to perceive that they would also become somebody's wives in future. His attitude towards women brings forth his ideas regarding women. His rejection of Tess and his sexual past with the stranger proves that "the feminine flesh is for him a prey,an object." (Beauvoir 371) Her rejection by Angel reflects- Hardy's own ideology, who believed that women should be chaste and pure. Here Hardy's didactic nature breathes out his own double sexual standard. He was biased against women, which is very clear in Tess of the d'Urbervilles. He punished Tess for her loss of virginity whereas he pardoned Angel for his adulterous past. Both the characters of Hardy had the same bygone (past) but one (male) was pardoned whereas the other (female) was severely punished. This unequal judgment propagates Hardy's view that women should not violate conventional sphere and if they fail to maintain this norm, men have every right to reject them for their unconventionality.

By inflicting punishment on Tess, Hardy has demanded Tess to maintain the social decorum whereas such a demand was not made for Alec and Angel who were the real culprits. Why does Hardy have a liberal attitude towards his heroes? Why do they remain scot-free even after committing great crimes? In fact Hardy seems to reward them by transforming them into either the representative of the society as in the case of Michael Henchard or by converting the rapist into a missionary in Alec's case.

Hardy does not like women to be free and independent in the patriarchal society. His novels vividly describe that he wanted women to be economically, mentally and physically dependent upon males. His thoughts actually reveal his fear of women's inner abilities. He wanted women to confine themselves within the four walls. That's why when after her desertion Tess attempted to live an independent life and earn a living for her family, she was emotionally blackmailed by Alec. He took the advantage of her father's death and weakened her by reminding her of the financial status of her family. Hardy deliberately rejects Tess as a self-sacrificing woman. Does he want to set her as a role model? Or whether he was reflecting the mentality of common Victorian male? These questions strengthen Hardy's image of being a misogynist.

The death of her father and poor financial condition of the family compelled Tess to surrender her body to Alec. Her humiliating surrender before Alec was surprisingly disappointing as her resignation signifies the victory of men. Hardy does not bestow on his

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heroines' fundamental rights. They lack assertive power and tolerate every suffering inflicted upon them happily and silently.

Hardy has tried to defend Angel and the entire male society by ignoring his adulterous past and making him a judge of Tess' life. Hardy the man of double standard who, not on the basis of crime but on the basis of sex, evaluates Angel and Tess's sin? Why does he not inflict the same punishment for both of them? Why does he not permit Tess to reject Angel's desertion? Why does Hardy make Tess ask for forgiveness from the man who is equally unchaste? Why is Tess not given the right to reject Angel as her husband who also lacks virtue?

Alec's continuous perusal clearly shows that his interest did not lie in providing comfort to Tess' family but it was his sexual instinct which promoted him to take on her family's responsibilities in return of her physical surrenders. His continuous perusal shows that "she is to be brought up as man's subordinate, to minister to his need and to give him pleasure." (Figs 97) It was Alec's selfishness, which provoked him to bear her responsibilities, and it was Angel's ego, which encouraged him to reject her as responsibility.

The unexpected return of Angel prompted Tess to kill Alec because Alec had told her that her husband has abandoned her permanently. Tess had a forgiving and slavish nature that not only pardoned Angel for his sin and later murdered Alec for the same Angel who was unfaithful and insensitive husband. Tess's sufferings were due to her slavish and submissive nature which first converted her from an innocent virgin into an unwed mother, from an unwed mother into a deserted wife, then into Alec's concubine and ultimately his murderess. Had she been educated and strong, she would not have gone through such sufferings but Hardy was not in favour of women's education which shows that he was afraid of women's independence, the independence which could teach them to disobey the patriarchs so finally women were, "without property or political rights, barred from the academics of higher education and from most professions, lacking any independent legal identity, women could in fact be said... to be 'without a country" (Wollstonecraft XIX).

Women are, undoubtedly, physically weak but Hardy projected them as inferior beings deprived of intellect who require male support at every step of their life. "One of the most enduring ideas which men have passed down through the centuries in order to bolster their own feeling of superiority is the notion that women are intellectually inferior" (Figs 23). Through the characterization of Tess Hardy has explored his own views regarding ideal women. Tess, the chief protagonist in the novel, is given adequate space but not adequate assertive power to

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act and react against the patriarchal parents, Alec, Angel and the patriarchal society. Hardy is not in favour of giving women the rights to raise their voice against established patriarchal society. He believes that women should be physically chaste and pure whereas he does not apply the same conditions for his male character. If in any case they fail to maintain their purity, they themselves are responsible and their male counterparts have every right to reject them. Hardy's views for his women characters reflect his own double moral standard, which brings him very much close to being a misogynist. Hardy has applied an adjective for Tess in his subtitle 'a pure woman' but followed with an interrogation mark. After going through the novel, one can easily perceive that he himself has contradicted his subtitle when she suffered the oppressive attitude of her parents and her desertion by her husband and expulsion from the society. Had Hardy truly considered her a chaste woman, she would not have become the centre of degradation for her parents and the matter of gossip for people, the victim of Angel's injustice, Alec's concubine and ultimately his mistress.

These sufferings of Tess show that Hardy neither as a novelist nor as a responsible citizen pleaded in his works for the equal relationship and common set of moral principles for both the sexes. It could be Hardy's own unsuccessful marital life, which somehow gets reflected in his novels. It can be asserted that:

Certainly the latter stages of his own marriage to Emma Lavinia Gifford must have contributed much to his somewhat equivocal attitudes. On the one hand, Hardy praises female endurance, strength, passion and sensitivity: on the other, he depicts women as meek, vain, plotting creatures of mercurial moods.(Allingham 23)

Otherwise what could be the reason of such a weak depiction of his female characters? After going through his novels, one can easily assess that his women characters are stereotype i.e. weak, passive, innocent and slavish in nature. Had he been a writer of the present era, he would have been severely criticized for his partial treatment. Probably he believes that "woman was created for man" (Wollstonecraft 28) but he must understand that like men women are also born free and as a person they are also entitled to enjoy the fundamental rights. They also have sentiments and emotions to express. They also desire to acquire some respectable place/status in the society. Why does Hardy through his works always make women realize that being physically weaker they are also devoid of intellect? His writings otherwise had been the best medium to make women familiar with their intellectual abilities and to prove themselves in men's world but unfortunately he treats women only as daughters, sisters, wives, deprived of any individual existence. Actually, through his works, Hardy endeavored to propagate his

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theory that women are not essential creatures and therefore they should be kept in gloom regarding their fundamental rights, serving as men's slaves or playthings. This was a high time that the misogynist traits in Hardy for portraying women as weak, submissive, subservient creatures, deprived of any intellect or personality of their own must be openly discussed and should need to reconsider his place in Victorian Literature.

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