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TRACING PARADIGM SHIFT IN HARDY'S *TESS*

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ABSTRACT

The idealization of women on the lines of stereotyped role has been a general tendency of patriarchal ideology. This is established by creating role models that are to be emulated for conformity with socio-cultural value system. Since literature is used as a medium of drawing such models, it is also a platform where these idealizations are challenged. The paper seeks to identify the treatment of women as human beings as is perceptible in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* where he stands firmly by his heroine. The portrayal of Tess within an oppressive environment lays open the biased norms of the society and her development beyond idealized portrayal that accommodates her follies allows her to find place for herself.

Keywords: Education and learning, responsibility, leadership.

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One universal fact that cannot be denied is that men have dominated all the institutions- the State, economy, education, religion, family. It is the judgment of men and their established stereotypes by which women are measured in society. The stereotypes are guided by the portrayal of women as belonging to either the 'good' or 'bad' category thereby presenting them either chaste or pure virgin or as *femme fatale* whose sexuality tends to threaten the social order. This notion of segregation of the character of women as belonging to either category has been proposed and approved by social and religious doctrines. The available and advocated interpretation of the religious texts have either denounced the status of women terming them as inferior creatures or laid down guidelines for their moral conduct which needs to be conducive to men. Such categories have also found acceptance in work of literature where we find models of perfection like Penelope, Sita, Sophie to emulate or of transgression as Cleopatra, Mohini, Medea to be punished.

While Literature is found establishing and promoting female stereotype, it has also come up as a means to challenge the same. Many writers have felt discomfort over the biased and constricting norms for half the category of human race and have favorably used their art to overcome the stereotype. Their portrayal of women as human beings challenges the biased cultural behavior and call for a plausible change to create an amicable environment amongst men and women of the society. Thomas Hardy is one such writer whose philogynist inclinations are perceptible in his works. He not only stands by his objectified and oppressed women while he strips the society of the unruly practices but also identifies the capacities that women behold

and aids them due opportunities that can strengthen their position within the society as is perceptible in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

The ideology that surrounds a woman escorts the writers to portray them with angel-like qualities. They are thought to possess extreme emotional sensitivity, selflessness and a dislike for the sensual aspect of life. A woman who falls prey to the sexual passion is condemned as a harlot or a fallen woman even while similar sexual appetites in a man are assumed natural and acceptable. The ritual of May-Day Dance in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is one in hundreds of examples of cultural formulations that have a propensity to diminish the status of women as human being. Tess is any other girl in the group in May-Day Dance where "some had beautiful eyes, other a beautiful nose, others a beautiful mouth and figures; few, if any, had all" (Tess 34). The voyeuring eyes value her not as a human but as a sensual being who had "a fullness of growth" and "bouncing handsome womanliness" (Tess 65). It is the demand of nature as represented by the girls in the group in May-Day Dance who become self-conscious while the glances become voyeuristic. The anxiety of the innocent girls is quite visible in their attempts to present themselves in the best possible picture. A difficulty of arranging their expressions in this dehumanizing exposure to public scrutiny, an inability to balance their heads and to dissociate self-consciousness from their feathers was apparent in them. It all showed that they were genuine country girls, unaccustomed to many eyes (Tess 34). With his portrayal of the scene, Hardy scathingly attacks the ethical guidelines formulated by the society that promote such rituals that turn participant women into objects of selection as they please the eyes.

In nineteenth century, Hardy understood the importance of education and learning as an important means to realize the full capacities of one's individual being. This is demonstrated in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* where he assigns this privilege of formal education to Tess who achieves a few years of formal education up to sixth standard. This definitely places Tess in a superior position to other country girls and even her mother. Arnold Kettle puts forth his opinion that is in line with the educational advantage imparted to Tess: "If she had not, as Hardy reminds us more than once, had a different sort of schooling from her mother, she would not have been what she is" (Kettle 24). The essential difference that education positions is necessary to raise women from a mere dumb recipient of incomprehensible social force to an individual who can utilize resources efficiently. Initially Tess experiences some discomfort of her social place but having no option but to support an idle crumbling family and growing poverty she exhibits her ability to utilize the resources available to her.

Tess's ability to take responsibility of her family, agriculture farm and market transactions places her in direct competition to a male since such role playing is considered appropriate to them. Physical strength, far-sightedness and leadership are the characteristics peculiar to men. But when these characteristics are attributed to women, one is able to identify with the fact that a female is in no manner inferior to her male counterpart. Opposite to feminine delicacy and inactivity which the society generally advocates, Tess is able to display an impressive degree of physical agility and fitness which one witness while she works in the fields, in the dairy and in her worst circumstances under a tyrant master at Flintcomb Ash. Critics have been over occupied with the passivity of Tess's behavior during the crucial events of her life that starts from the death of her horse, Prince, and ends with her own death. But they have surely missed her protest against the general feminine behavior. Tess, after losing her maidenhood, expresses her failure to understand Alec's "meaning till it was too late" (105) at which Alec responds with the male clinch, that's what every woman says. Tess's remonstrance is a clear indication of her disapproval of Alec's attitude which tends to reduce her to an ineffectual being:

Tess, with her eyes flashing as the latent spirit, stands against the generality of the feminine behaviour: "I could knock you out of the gig! Did it never strike your mind that what every woman says some women may feel?"(Tess 105)

Later in the novel, after Tess is deserted by Angel, Alec's unreasonable behavior receives a rare act of courage when Tess hits Alec so hard that "a scarlet oozing appeared where her blow had alighted and in a moment the blood began dropping from his mouth upon the straw" (Tess 374). Her final act of Alec's murder is to be read

as an act of registering her protest against the social system which allows little or no space to woman's essential self. In context to Tess's passivity, it is however worth mentioning here that her passivity is consequent to her dependence on men folk she comes in contact with. It, therefore, becomes apparent that the author's point is to underscore how a woman suffers through the dependence upon another human being and also exercise his attack on the double standards maintained for a woman by the dominant group (Draper 73-79).

The society registers a separate place for "fallen women" and refute them the privilege to participate in societal engagements. The denial of the church to baptize Tess's so called "illegitimate baby" and later denial for a Christian burial speaks of the harsh nature of the society. Hardy utilizes Tess's position to mock at the falsified notions of piousness by Clerics. When her child is refused a Christian burial Tess out rightly declares that she has no longer a liking for people of such kind and that she would never turn to the Church. Tess's revolution is explained by Irving Howe as: "... what Tess is saying is that a man so seemingly deserves neither human affection nor religious respect" (421). Hardy, instead of giving in to the fallacious practices of the society criticizes the hollow values of the bourgeois middle class. He sees in Tess a "divine personage" while she performs that act of baptizing her baby. Her act reinforces the feminine agenda that challenges the social ideals of the era. Furthermore, Tess's free movement in the fields, usual working engagements, the acceptance of a single mother with her (il)legitimate child is not treated as an anomaly by the class she belongs to. Obvious as it is, the idea of purity/ virginity is mocked at as Tess's feeling of her baby in the harvest scene is never glanced upon as an inharmonious act. She is seen as a mother fulfilling her duty of motherhood.

Tess's critical opinion and clear judgments definitely raise her above the stereotype that Hardy was trying to remodel. Her questions can be read as an open challenge to the set codes of sexual morality. She puts forth her query: "was once lost always lost really true of chastity" (Tess 150). There is no doubt that Hardy stands by his heroine when in the very next line a possibility that Tess might prove the concept of chastity false is put on view. Unconventionally, Tess emerges as a strong woman rising from her difficulties and nourishes hope for a better life. At Talbothay Dairy, she embraces life and makes friends. She is able to come out of her small world, her earlier guilt, and enter into relationship with others.

The confession scene yet again lays open the hypocrisy of moral standards practiced by the society which dramatizes a "sheer power of sexuality and the gross injustice of a social system which thrust upon the woman the burden of sexual responsibility and guilt" (Millgate *Biography* 354). The circumstances hindering the confession of Angel before marriage are similar to those of Tess but it is Tess who suffers and is denied pardon:

"Almost always it is a woman who pays, who finds herself bereft or betrayed by some such trick of fate or failure of character and what finally destroys for Tess is not, of course, her sexual betrayal by Alec but the far more radical infidelity of the man in whom she is voluntarily inverted all her trust and love. (Millgate *Biography* 358)

Angel, who represents patriarchal ego, takes for granted Tess's forgiveness for the same kind of act for which he cannot forgive her: "O Tess, forgiveness does not apply to the case. You were one person: now you are another. My God-how can forgiveness meet such a grotesque-prestigation as that!"(Tess 264). Obvious as it becomes here is the proposal of chastity that is implied only to women. Despite his claim to be liberal-minded, Angel fails to shake off the conventions, the class-consciousness in his relation with Tess with whom he adopts an attitude of a "romanticizing patronage" (Boumelha 43). But Tess insists upon the recognition of her "self" following Angel's rejection. She opines: "I thought Angel, that you loved me-me, my very self! (Tess 264-65). She declines her past to be responsible for her rejection by Angel. She is blunt and open to tell Angel: "It is in you, what you are angry at, Angel. It is not in me" (265). There is no denying that Hardy proposes woman's emancipation while he argues against the discrimination against sexually fallen women. Tess's open-mindedness and honesty towards herself enables her to be less resistant in keeping her secret. It is definitely a step towards development of the female self and a step beyond the female archetype. The characters of Tess and her development can be summed up in the words of Albert J. Lavalley:

“Tess is reduced and ruined socially, but in her trials she becomes the source of a new morality, a new purity, a truly Christian ethic of natural selfhood divorced from traditional theology and the social laws based upon it. She becomes, in fact, the prototype of a new and harmonious self that can meet the new age of skepticism that can step, even with only a sixth standard training, beyond the doomed and dying ballad world of family and Wessex. Though she nevertheless attains a grandeur of human possibility in coping with it. (LaValley 6)

Tess evolves as an independent minded, fully realized character thereby registering a departure from the unrealistic ideal epitomized, who engage herself into a profession to make up for the economic calamity fallen upon her family. She evolves beyond religious sanction of what is right and redefines it in accordance to what is essentially appropriate while she baptizes her child and later when she performs a Christian burial. Her objections and actions allow for a rethinking of existing socio-cultural and religious sanctions that have a smothering control rather than a supporting function.

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