



# CONDITION OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN HARDY'S NOVELS: SPECIAL REFERENCE IN 'TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES

**R.B Singh**

Research Scholar

**Dr. Suresh Kumar**

Supervisor and Asst. Professor

*Dept. of English, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, NIMS University Rajasthan,  
Delhi-Jaipur Highway, Jaipur-303121*

## ABSTRACT

Thomas Hardy was one of the most popular Novelist of Victorian age. His writings are reflective of the great movement from the Victorian to the modern age. He focuses on social problems like unjust marriage law, superstition, inequality, proprieties, orthodoxy and patriarchy by his Novels. Hardy tried tirelessly in order to change the male dominated society and to bring out the desired changes for the mutual benefit of women as well as man. The Victorian society of that century was rigid and uncompromising one towards women. Friendship between man and women was not acceptable in that time. Live in relationship is a social crime.

Thomas Hardy showed his sympathy to the women in Victorian age that faces problems of unhappy marriage life, divorces, deception in love, merciless fate, hypocrisy, mistreatment and orthodoxy. Hardy tried to change the views of male-dominated Society for the benefit of women through his Novels.

In his 'Tess of the D'Urbervilles' Hardy tries to sketch pathetic condition of women. She suffers a lot in her life from the birth to last breath of life because of honest love, scarifies and faithfulness. Female protagonist of Hardy's novels became the victim of patriarchal society. They face suppression, maltreatment, wife-selling, domestic violence, sexual harassment in their life. The condition of women was very pathetic; they had neither freedom of speech nor freedom to work according to their choice. They were used for physical pleasure. This situation was very accurately depicted by Thomas Hardy in his novels.

**Keywords:** *Ambiguity, Feminist, Hardy, Miserable, Misogynist, Patriarchy.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Thomas Hardy is an eminent novelistS of Victorian age. He showed his sympathy to the women in his writings. Very boldly he focuses pathetic condition of women in society. Hardy tried to change the condition of women by his writings.

Through this research paper, I will try to explain pathetic condition of major female characters in Hardy's novel special reference to 'Tess of the D'Urbervilles'. She suffers a lot in life from the birth to last breath of her life socially, mentally, and physically. In that age, women were not treated equal as men. Female protagonist of Hardy's novels became the victim of patriarchal hegemony. Feminism is a range of political movements, ideologies, and social movements that share a common goal: to define, establish and achieve political, economical, 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 know 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 determined by the concept of tasks, functions, and roles attributed to women and men in society and public and private life. The male has to reduce suppression, maltreatment, wife-selling, domestic violence, sexual harassment towards women.



D. H Lawrence observes that 'Tragedy in Hardy's novels is associated with the fate of the individuals revolting against the society's conventional standards of behavior.'<sup>1</sup>

Women in Hardy's novels struggle to achieve self-fulfillment, self-respect and their rights from society, deeply entrenched in the Victorian concept of male superiority and female submission. Hardy kept firmly to his practice of presenting the erotic woman, the sexy woman, as neither dumb nor loose in morals. To bring moral seriousness and sexiness together in the single female form was not only to fly in the face of current convention, code and belief, it was also subversive. Hardy, the iconoclast, in presenting Victorians with female models who did not conform to the stereotypes, not only offended against proprieties but also threatened the statuesque, hitting at the very structure and foundation of the society itself.

In Hardy, most alive of the men are the creatures of the intellect and the most alive of the women are the creatures of passion. 'Passion is used with a spiritual significance, denoting 'elements in the higher nature of man' and covering Love, Religion, and Poetry, all three words being intended in a mysterious sense'.<sup>2</sup> We see Tess, Sue, Bathsheba, Eustacia and Elizabeth Jane love their lovers with whole-heartedly, without any calculated reason and at last their love tends to reach spiritual heights.

## 2. MISERABLE CONDITION OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN HARDY'S NOVELS

Mostly Novels of Hardy are love stories, dealing with the relationship between the two sexes. Hardy Closely associated with the subject of love is the subjects of marriage, sex and divorce. In 'Tess of the D'Urbervilles' women character suffer more in life for love, marriage, sex, peace, safety, self-respect, security etc. she was everywhere in chains, even last breath of life. It is incontrovertible truth that women characters of Hardy's novels facing infinite sorrow, suffering and notoriety in life.

In Hardy's novels, Fate plays an important role. It is the supreme over-character in his works, controlling the destinies of his characters and sending them to their doom. His characters seem to be simply puppets in the hands of Fate and Destiny.

Hardy's female characters Tess and Bathsheba, Thomasin and Grace are the victims of Don Juan, Angel and Knight inflict unmerited suffering on the women they love from a harsh, doctrinaire idealism that freezes the flow of natural compassion. In other words, each woman is encountering the lover who is to bring her to disaster.

Tess has a strong sense of responsibility on an unyielding heart, which causes her tragedy. Angel and Alec are the two main male characters in 'Tess of the D'Urbervilles' and they are also the two men who influence Tess deeply and finally destroy her.

Tess is a female protagonist in the novel, who suffers a lots in her life not because of her crime or sin but due to her unfortunate life which is completely under the control of fate. The novel shows that she has to face the wrath of fate or destiny for being a nice human being in the world of inhumanity.

In the novel, 'Tess of the D'urbervilles' by Thomas Hardy, nature plays a pivotal role in defining the events of Tess's life. ... As the seasons go by, and Tess's life experiences take a turn for the worse, winter and fall correlate with her rape, the death of her baby, and ultimately her own demise for killing Alec.

The main female character in Hardy's Novel 'Tess of the d'Urbervilles', Tess is not just one character of the greatest but also one of the strongest women in English literature. Tess is seen rebelling against her female stereotypical roles when she turns from a virgin to an unmarried mother and from deserted wife to a mistress.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bruce Steels, ed. Study of Thomas Hardy and other essays- D.H Lawrence, Cambridge University Press, 1985, 21.



Alec may have appropriated her body but her spirit remains self-governing and unyielding. She wants to start anew with vivacity and courage. But how to annihilate the past and make new the day?

Hardy has made it very clear that Tess is a victim of her sex, being oppressed by Alec, the man who is supposed to be her kin. Alec takes advantage of the situation. This is a clear case of rape, and the situation itself makes it even worse, since Tess in some way, trusted him. She should have been able to trust the person who she thinks is her cousin. She has now ended up in a very difficult situation which also leads to other consequences.

One does not decide what family one is born into. The innocent child, Tess, cannot be blamed for being born into a poor family. Tess is a victim of her upbringing, the situation of her father and mother as well as the knowledge of her ancestors, who were rich and prosperous. The fact that they had existed did not help Tess. However, it would have been a different story if she had been born into a wealthy family. Tess is the eldest of the family's children and being a girl in that time was more complicated.

Tess feels responsible when the family's horse dies in an accident, since she was driving the carriage, and she feels that she has to do something to make it right. She has no other option than to go and see the old lady D'Urberville to claim kin. Tess's family needs a horse to be able to make a living. Since she is the eldest child and because she feels responsible for her family she goes even though she does not want to. As Albert J La Valley puts it: "she goes to Trantridge despite her apprehensions of danger, in an effort to do something about a situation with which neither she nor her family can cope in the old ways."<sup>3</sup> In doing this Tess can be seen as a victim of her parents situation, being poor and also of her mother's motives, that is that it could lead to a marriage which would benefit the family.

The whole time these events are taking place it is Tess who takes care of her family. Even when she knows she will be hanged for murder, she does what she can to help her family out. Now that Angel has forgiven her, she asks him to marry her younger sister Liza-Lu and he promises that he will. Then she is content, because she knows that her family will be taken care of. Until the end she is a victim of her family and their situation.

This strong, active impulse in Tess to confront the past, to put an end to it, and to make new the day, urges Hardy to structure her story in such a way as to reflect both her regenerative powers, her rebounding will to act, and her physical, sexual powers of revitalization. Hardy places a rhythmic accent of her story to mirror her cyclical feminine life. It starts from her defloration of chastity by Alec, her giving birth to a dead child, her heart's need to baptize the baby, the religious objections arrived between her desire and the act, between salvation and damnation the first part of her life ends here. The second part of her life starts with Angel's arrival, his love and marriage to her and ultimately his brutal rejection after knowing her past.

### 3. THE TRAGEDY OF LOVE AND MARRIAGE

Being a poor woman survival in Victorian society was not easy. However one expects the Church to be the institution which helps people who live under hard conditions. When it comes to Tess, this was not the case as she was an unmarried woman with an illegitimate child. As a good Christian, Tess does what is expected of her and visits Church. It is not her fault that she was raped and had a child without being married. However when she wants to baptize her illegitimate child the Church refuses. She wants to do the right thing. When her baby dies she wants to bury him in the Churchyard but the Church does not allow this. This is a clear case of oppression from the Church.

Tess has a strong sense of responsibility on an unyielding heart, which causes her tragedy. Angel and Alec are the two main male characters in 'Tess of the D'Urbervills' and they destroy her. Tess breaks; 'Terror was upon her white face' and the beautiful expressive mouth which had once reminded Angel of 'roses filled with snow' is blasted: and seeing her collapse, Angel becomes conciliatory. Angel, to a far greater extent than Tess, is formed and shaped by his past. She, with her rebounding spirits, vibrant sexuality and self-determination, had created herself anew, and had risen above her past where Angel is still victim of his. The fallen woman is rendered

---

<sup>3</sup> Albert J. La Valley. Ed., Twentieth Century Interpretations of Tess of the d'Urbervilles(New Jersey; Prentice Hall, 1969)19.



dumb and deaf, not by the seducer but by the lawful husband. The real poison in her life is not Alec but Angel Clair. It shows the pathetic condition of women by patriarchal society even beloved or husband also.

In the novel, 'Tess of the D'Urbervilles' by Thomas Hardy, nature plays a pivotal role in defining the events of Tess's life. ... As the seasons go by, and Tess's life experiences take a turn for the worse, winter and fall correlate with her rape, the death of her baby, and ultimately her own demise for killing Alec.

Tess is a female protagonist in the novel, who suffers lots in her life not because of her crime or sin but due to her unfortunate life which is completely under the control of fate. The novel shows that she has to face the wrath of fate or destiny for being a nice human being in the world of inhumanity.

Hardy vividly dramatizes Angel's moral weakness, his fall from being the caring lover who had sworn to 'love and cherish and defend her under any conditions, changes, charges, or revelations'. Angel casts a 'Last Day' judgment upon Tess. Tess still utters her last defense; I love you forever in all changes, in all disgraces, because you are yourself. I ask no more. Then how can you, O my own husband, stop loving me?

In Mostly novels of Thomas Hardy, Feminists constantly regard marriage as a social issue for women. Because of the unequal status between husband and wife in their partnership, women's role diminishes. The brilliant American feminist writer Betty Friedan notes in 'The Feminine Mystique' (1963) that the women treatment is a kind of enslavement.

At the end of the story Tess and Angel end up at Stonehenge where she lays to rest on the stone altar before the men come to get her. Angel wants her to get up and flee, but Tess is satisfied and tells him: "One of my mother's people was a shepherd hereabouts, now I think of it. And you used to say at Talbothays that I was a heathen. So now I am at home."<sup>11</sup> In this way the novel also ends with a ritual. Tess is being a sacrificial victim. She later gets hanged for the crime she had committed, that is killing Alec. One can discuss whether it is Tess who should be blamed entirely or if there are one or two other persons to be blamed as well.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Hardy had profound sympathy with the severe suffering and submissive of Victorian women in the patriarchal society. He never treats his women cruelly but life as Hardy saw it. He made his female characters 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.

Hardy's female characters paid so for no fault of them. Tess was innocent. Angel deserted her because he thought that if a woman had lost her physical chastity, she would not be pure. But as soon as his outlook was changed, he realized his mistakes and came back to accept her. He blamed himself for judging her so hastily and cruelly.

Secondly, if at all any fault had been done by her, the punishment would not have been just. She was too sorely tired. She came out pure. But it was too late. The woman failed to get any consolation in life. No one except death showed mercy to her. Nevertheless, she fought against the cruel attitude towards women in patriarchal society and challenged the Victorian social codes of behavior and lifestyle. Tess had long been caged in the cage of pain, melancholy and suffering of social norms and expectations of the society. At last she flew away from all these chains through her death.

As concluded, In Hardy's novels women characters suffer more in their life for everything like love, marriage, sex, peace, respect etc. It is incontrovertible truth that women characters of Hardy's everywhere in chains. They face gross injustice, furious behavior, subverting orthodoxy, unhappy wedlock, solitary, monotony life, snobbish behavior, pernicious life, severe suffering in their life. After facing infinite sorrow, incomplete desire women characters of Hardy face end of life without any mercy. At the end of this topic I concluded the destiny of women infinite sorrow and incomplete desire.

#### REFERENCES

1. Sandlin, Anita, "Fear and Fascination: A Study of Thomas Hardy and the New Woman" (2011). Electronic Theses and Dissertations. 184.  
<https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etd/184>
2. International Journal of Education and Information Studies. Volume 1, Number 1 (2011), pp. 19-24 © Research India Publications <http://www.ripublication.com/ijeis.htm>



3. Bruce Steels, ed. Study of Thomas Hardy and other Essays—D .H. Lawrence, Cambridge University Press, 1985, 21.
4. Thomas Hardy: A Study of the Wessex Novels , H.C. Duffin, 1916.
5. Thomas Hardy's The Mayor of Casterbridge.
6. A Norton Critical Edition, Second Edition, Ed. by Philip Mallet.
7. Bhatt, A. (2018). The New Woman and Her Doomed Fate in Thomas Hardy's Jude the Obscure and Kate Chopin's the Awakening.
8. Hardy Thomas, The Mayor of Casterbridge, MacMillan, 1974.
9. Duffin H. C. Thomas Hardy, Anmolpublications, 2000.
10. Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter.
11. Hardy Thomas, Far From the Madding Crowd, UBSPD.
12. Hardy Thomas, Tess of the D 'Urbervilles, Chancellor press, 1991.
13. Research paper written by research scholar Mona Holmberg on topic Tess a victim of her Society in Thomas Hardy's Tess of the d'Urbervilles
14. Thomas Hardy. Tess of the D 'Urbervilles. (England: Penguin, 2002).
15. Rosmarie Morgan. Woman and sexuality in the novels of Thomas Hardy. (London: Routledge, 1991).
16. Anna Jonasdottir. Why women are oppressed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).
17. Serena Jones. Feminist Theory and Christian Theology. (USA: Augsburg Fortress, 2000).
18. Thomas Hardy. Tess of the D'Urbervilles. (England: Penguin, 2002).
19. Joan Perkin, Victorian women. (Cambridge: UP, 1994) 6-7
20. Albert J. La Valley. Ed., Twentieth century interpretations of Tess of the d'Urbervilles (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1969).
21. The Bible: Exodus 20:12 (Oxford: University Press, 1995).