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Social History and Social Reform: The Politics of Thomas Hardy's Fiction

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Abstract: Through his seminal fictional works, Thomas Hardy made invaluable contribution to the Victorian Era in terms of awareness raising and sensitising society to its own shortcomings. In his novels, he portrays the lives of people who are adversely affected by the social norms and moral codes operative in the Victorian Era. The insensitivity of Victorian society to the genuine longings of people, especially women, is most often the root cause of tragedies his characters suffer. This article attempts to identify the factors impacting Hardy's characters against the backdrop of the challenges industrialization had thrown up, the lowly status routinely accorded to women, glaring gender disparity, unequal opportunities for educational and economic advancement and a host of other problems that beset the English society of the time. It analyses Hardy's novels in the above light, and arrives at the conclusion that they invariably, and emphatically, underscore the need for the Victorian society to reform itself and

thus render life a pleasant experience for all, irrespective of class and gender.

Keywords: Victorian Era; gender disparity; moral codes; meliorism; social reform

I. Introduction

Thomas Hardy's novels provide a vehicle to critique socio-historical changes that occurred in the culture, and more specifically in the family, in Victorian England. (Schoenfeld 219)

The Victorian Age was a time of intense activity and transformation in practically every field of English life. The Industrial Revolution was inexorably gaining power over the lives of people and the state apparatus. Machinery was adversely affecting the factory workers, and inequality gravely impacted the lives

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of people, especially those belonging to the lower classes. But in terms of literary production the Victorian Era is known as the golden age, and it is mostly due to its robust engagement with social history and social reform. There is also a fine blend of the imaginative and the realistic in it elevating it, in the process, to the level of great literature. Incidentally, it is during this era that the novel grew rapidly and surpassed every other genre of literature. The novelists aptly and deftly combined fact and fiction. Their novels are not only reflective of the era and its mores, but also critical of them. The novelists incorporated and faithfully reflected the social and economic realities, and belief systems of the age, and added a critical dimension to such reflection.

II. The Socio-historical Context of Thomas Hardy's Fiction

Thomas Hardy, who is indubitably among the greatest of the Victorian novelists, witnessed the problems of his society at close quarters and for that reason, among other things, shaped his novels as socio-historical documents infusing them with a reformist spirit. They evidence Hardy's deep understanding of his society and his realistic perspective on contemporary life. Unsurprisingly, his fictional characters emerge as spokespersons of people in his particular historical and

social context. That his novels represent his times is a fact often acknowledged by critics as well. Lois Bethe Schoenfeld, for example, affirms: "Hardy's fiction is a product of the ideologies of his period, subject to a variety of influences, which we can then use to understand the history of the period, and what caused people to believe and behave the way they did" (83).

The Industrial Revolution, as adumbrated above, radically transformed life during the Victorian Era. England was rapidly advancing economically and technologically. The improved employment opportunities and creation of new businesses brought about a conducive environment, especially for the middle-class families to experience life in an altogether new light. However, the benefits of economic progress did not percolate to the lowest rungs of society. Only the privileged sections of the population could elevate their economic and social status, while many who continued with the traditional lifestyle and business practices, could not catch up with the rapid changes and therefore found them left far behind in the race. Hardy was keenly aware of these developments in his society and he made it a point to incorporate them into his fictional works. His magnum opus *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is written against the backdrop of the changing world in

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which he lived, and so are his other novels to one degree or another. This novel, in particular, accurately represents the effects of cultural and economic transformation, rise of industrialization, and the continuing stranglehold of traditions on the English society. Its hero Henchard manages to elevate his position socially and economically, but he cannot sustain it for long. Hardy thus depicts the triumph of modernism over tradition. Being a traditionalist Henchard cannot compete with his rival Farfrae who symbolises modernism, and finally concedes defeat.

III. Focus on Women's Plight

In the nineteenth-century England, women's rights were extremely circumscribed. The Victorian society severely restricted their social, educational and economic opportunities. They were required to stay at home, attend to their husbands' needs and take care of children. When a woman got married, her rights and obligations were legally transferred to her husband and her properties, such as they were, too were brought under his control.¹ Women were required to obey their husbands because men controlled resources and women had no independent means of livelihood. In this context, it is possible to even conflate marriage with slavery

since they were essentially the same. Whether it is a single woman or a married woman, she invariably suffered from many social and economic disadvantages and, dictated by the social scripts, she was not allowed to develop her personality except as the so called 'angel in the house.'

Hardy attached pivotal importance to the position of women and faithfully represented their unenviable social, legal and moral status in his novels. His deep understanding of women's problems not only found an articulation in his novels but even led to his raising a critical voice against the social and moral standards of his society which were openly detrimental to women's interests. He identified patriarchy and other unfriendly ideologies as the root cause of the tragedies experienced by his heroines. His heroines, for that reason, double as his spokespersons and implicitly argue against the subjection of women, especially where marriage and moral codes are concerned, which can be legitimately blamed for being the instruments of women's oppression.

Hardy considered himself a 'meliorist,' a person who strongly believes that the world can be improved by human effort. He attempts to re-script the governing gender narrative. He indicts the Victorian moral codes,

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conventions and institutions by portraying his heroines the way he does – unconventional in their conception and characterization. They are independent in spirit and they try to transcend the limitations imposed on them by society. His intention in so depicting his heroines is to suggest his rejection of society's attempts at force-fitting women into limited roles since he thinks that women should be given a chance to break free from the traditional gender categories and forge independent identities of their own.

In the nineteenth-century so much importance was given to a woman's role as wife and mother that marriage came to be viewed as her chief goal in life. It can be easily discerned in Hardy's novels that most women characters are psychologically conditioned to treat marriage as the be-all and end-all of their life. He opposes this seemingly inflexible principle by drawing the readers' attention to the injustice attendant on the institution of marriage. Self-sacrifice and long suffering were the inevitable lot of the Victorian women, including Hardy's heroines in spite of their being strong willed and in spite of their spirited struggle against the unfriendly social norms and the odds often occasioned by them.

IV. Unfriendly Ideologies and Institutions Governing Women's Lives

In almost all his novels, Hardy depicts the intricacies of love affairs and matrimonial conflicts in order to resister his protest against the hardships casually imposed upon women by the Victorian society. He portrays unconventional women like Bathsheba Everdene, in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, who refuses to become a man's possession as a wife. In *The Return of the Native* he creates two different kinds of women characters, Thomasin Yeobright and Eustacia Vye, in order to expose the sordid realities underlying the English society in respect of the marriage scripts. Thomasin marries Damon Wildeve in spite of the fact that he does not deserve her devotion. Uncritically upholding the long established tradition, she plays the role of a submissive wife and abandons every chance of developing her own personality. By means of the character of Thomasin, Hardy establishes how marriage often turned out to be an emotional trap or intellectual prison for the Victorian women.

In contrast to Thomasin, Eustacia defies the deeply entrenched codes of her society and attempts to visualise a life of greater freedom and choice than what is usually permitted to women of her time. She refuses to follow the restrictive ideals of femininity and wifehood and

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uses marriage as a means to escape from her limited and limiting environment so that she can fulfil her legitimate desires. Although she finds marriage to be her only means of emancipation, she soon realizes that it does not promise the fulfilment of any of her aspirations. In fact, it binds her even more tenaciously to tradition and grievously affects her personality. Having been driven to desperation, she seeks to pursue her dreams outside the confines of marriage. Hardy obviously feels a fair measure of sympathy for Thomasin and her traditional way of life and also for Eustacia whose dreams are set at naught by the intrusive and invasive social norms.

Hardy invariably draws the attention of his readers to the oppressive influence of the institutions of marriage and church in the nineteenth-century England where marriage and child-bearing were projected as the major goals of women in life. Women wanted to marry in order to ensure social security and status, and they often even applied dishonest means in their eagerness to find husbands who had the potential to provide for them. Arabella Donn of *Jude the Obscure* is a case in point. Hardy blames the social laws that match Jude Fawley with a woman like Arabella who wants to marry him just to ensure her own comfort and safety, leading partially

to the failure of Jude's life. Hardy also portrays Eustacia as a sensual woman, but the sensual aspect of her life is not destructive like that of Arabella.

Hardy recognizes that one of the reasons that kept women in bondage in the Victorian Age was their lack of economic independence. Unlike men, who controlled all the available resources, women were economically deprived. Working class women were expected to work hard but make do with meagre wages. Because of their economic insecurity women had to depend on their husbands for security and sustenance. This aspect is explicitly focussed in case of Eustacia who, being a middle-class woman, cannot earn her living because in her social context it is unacceptable for a woman to work outside home. However Tess, belonging as she does to the working class, seeks and finds a job, although an ill paid one. She still remains dependent on men! Alec d'Urbervilles repeatedly and unscrupulously exploits her economic and social vulnerability to his advantage.

In the beginning of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* Hardy depicts one of the not so uncommon English customs of the time, i.e. selling one's wife in an auction. When Henchard sells his wife Susan, she immediately leaves, along with her daughter Elizabeth-Jane, to live with

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Richard Newson, a sailor, because she desperately needs someone to support her and her child. Years later, on hearing that Newson is lost at sea, she worries a great deal about her daughter's future and the financial problems that would soon ensue. She feels once again obliged to return to Henchard in order to escape economic hardships. Thomasin is also one of the best examples of Hardy's characters who, like many real life Victorian women, views marriage as a means to solve her economic problems, but only to be utterly disappointed in the final analysis.

Victorian women were also sexually oppressed in subtle and overt ways. Victorian society compelled women to control their sexual urges and those who had premarital affairs were ostracized and labelled as fallen women. Chastity and purity were expected only of women. Men were allowed to pursue their passions and desires and were free to enter into premarital and extramarital sexual liaisons. This is only just one instance of double standard of morality in the Victorian society and Hardy bitterly criticizes it in his novels. He rejects the idea of 'ideal woman' and portrays unconventional women characters that break the stereotypes of virtuous as well as the so called fallen woman.

Unlike many of Hardy's women characters who face problems because of their economic dependence on men, Lucetta Templeman of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is a financially empowered woman who nevertheless experiences problems because of the moral codes operative in her society. Lucetta is punished by her society because of her past relationship with Henchard. Thus, like Sue and Tess, Lucetta is also punished for no fault of her own.

In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* Hardy critiques the idea of women's purity through the character of Tess. In this novel he draws a realistic picture of his society focusing on the double standard of morality practiced by it. According to Manjit Kaur, "By calling Tess, 'a pure woman' as in the subtitle of the novel, Hardy challenges both the idea of female purity and double moral standards practiced by men and women in the Victorian society" (70). Hardy faults the biased society which accepts Alec as a preacher, instead of punishing him, but condemns Tess as a fallen woman. Society does not take into account the difference between a woman who is seduced and a woman who deviates from the moral norms of her own accord. Tess does not transgress the moral codes by a free exercise of will. She is ill treated by the two important men in her life, and she finds herself in a special predicament

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as a result. Guided by biological imperatives Alec subjects her to his lust, and by bowing to social expectations, Angel appraises her in terms of the nebulous idea of women's purity and abandons her to her fate as a result. Thus Tess has to pay for her premarital affair, first by losing her husband, Angel, and then by losing her life itself.

V. Flawed Educational System and its Fallout

Hardy does not spare the educational system of the Victorian England, which he considers to be seriously flawed. In *Jude the Obscure* Jude's, and to an extent Phillotson's, poverty proves to be an obstacle on their path as it blocks their progress and thwarts the fulfilment of their wishes, especially the wish to attend a university. Another related problem concerning education was that Victorian women did not have too many opportunities for studying and growing intellectually. Women were, instead, expected to learn the tasks involved in housekeeping, childbearing and child rearing. Writers of various descriptions too often suggested that women's place was in the home, and not the big world outside.

By calling attention to women's longing for education, Hardy emphasises the importance of women's gaining independence and freeing themselves

from their slavery to tradition. It is a point Hardy projects especially through the characters of Elizabeth-Jane, Sue and Tess.

VI. Social Impediments to Self-actualization

Through the characters of Tess and Sue, Hardy shows how every move on the part of the Victorian women towards self-actualization and self-fulfilment was sought to be curtailed by the unfriendly social forces. He stresses that each woman is unique and she should not be judged by the standard criteria applied to 'an ideal woman.' For example, Sue being an intellectual, who in addition has a strong individuality, attempts to defy the self-defeatist ideals of femininity. When *Jude the Obscure* was first published the readers were outraged by the unconventional way in which Sue was presented. *The Morning Post* described Sue as "a strange and unnatural creature. A highly-strung, nervous, hysterical woman, who in the most tremendous crises of her life can quote poetry and prose as calmly as a lecturer, is distinctly abnormal" (Lerner & Holmstrom 109). Sue was described as an 'abnormal' woman, because she did not answer the usual description of an ideal woman. *The Morning Post* comment reveals the intolerance of Victorian society since Sue appeared to dispute the very need for marriage.

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The way Hardy portrays his heroines conveys his acute awareness of the difficulty women experienced in achieving freedom in the Victorian society where female subordination was institutionalized. His unconventional heroines struggle against the established gender norms inviting in the process humiliation, isolation and even expulsion from church and society. Through the characters of Eustacia and Sue, Hardy drives home the point that women also need to pursue the desires of their heart instead of blindly following the path prescribed for them by society. Eustacia, Lucetta, Tess and Sue do identify the way for fulfillment, but society intervenes and shatters their dreams. Eustacia expresses her, and by extension the Victorian women's, grief over the cruelty of her society when she appears the very last time in the novel.

How I have tried and tried to be a splendid woman, 'O, the cruelty of putting me into this ill-conceived world! I was capable of much; but I have been injured and blighted and crushed by things beyond my control! (Hardy 395)

In *Jude the Obscure* Sue initially enjoys a happy life with Jude. However, when people come to know that they have broken the established moral codes

by living together outside marriage they are subjected to innumerable hardships. They are isolated and their neighbours systematically ignore them. They are literally cast out from society. Neither Eustacia nor Sue can pursue to the end their desire to be an independent woman, because society proves to be too formidable a force to contend with and they simply cannot impose their will on it. Hardy encourages his readers to imagine how different his heroines' lives would have been had society not harboured prejudices against women. He underscores the crushing effect of society on his women characters, especially on the tragic figures of Eustacia, Lucetta, Tess and Sue.

VII. Hardy's Advocacy of Social Reform

A perceptive reading of Hardy's novels would also reveal his intention to hold a mirror up to the Victorian society so as to unveil the unflattering truths underlying it, and lay bare the pernicious ideologies it so dearly upheld. He was keenly aware of the adverse effects of social norms and moral codes on the lives of the Victorians. In order to render society a pleasant place to live in, Hardy recognized the need for reforming the contemporary institutions such as religion and marriage and revamping the prevailing value system as well.

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Hardy knew that social reform is not an easy task since it requires a determined, sustained and collective effort. He brings his unconventional heroines to tragic ends in order to emphatically underscore his disapproval of the rigid social and moral laws of the Victorian Era which severely impacted the lives of people, especially women. By means of the tragic ends of his heroines' lives, and even some of his male protagonists for that matter, Hardy proves to the readers how the Victorian society bent men and women to its will and how its power was so strong and pervasive that people such as Eustacia, Tess and Jude can escape it only by embracing death! Those who obey the accepted norms – Thomasin, Susan and Elizabeth-Jane – earn the grudging approval of society, while those who follow their own desires are harshly treated and even often ostracized. William A. Davis says, referring to Hardy's later novels, "He creates characters who bring about their own legal reforms by cleverly breaking the law, obtaining their own divorces, and going on with their lives" (138). However, in the process, they undergo immense suffering and find life not just unpleasant but unbearable. It is thus that Hardy's novels expose the unseemly realities of the Victorian society and demonstrate his unmistakable concern for reforming it.

VIII. Conclusion

Between bitter reality and sweet fairy tale, Hardy chooses the former in order to make the Victorians understand their own society better and to provoke them to reform it. The unhappy fates of his characters do not proceed from his dark philosophy, as is commonly believed, but from an honest assessment of the reality prevailing around him. If the English society was not ready to grant a happy life to those who thought differently and defied codes and conventions, Hardy should not be faulted for painting what appears to be a gloomy picture of things in his novels. In almost all his fictional works Hardy pins down the inflexible English society for the immense tragedies his characters suffer. He also indicts it for shaping their miserable fates and for ultimately bringing their lives to an unfortunate end. Society thus plays a deterministic role in the lives of his characters and the culture of the time configures their fate, leaving little or no room for the free play of will and exercise of freedom. Those who do attempt to exercise their freedom are made to pay even with their lives. Reforming society and getting it rid of its unpleasant aspects is the only means of preventing the repetition of tragedies of the kind that occur in Hardy's novels. English society was indeed reformed over time and the contribution of Hardy,

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and other socially conscious public figures, to it had been substantial.

Note

¹One of the explanations given for so subsuming a woman's rights and obligations with those of her husband was that it acted as a deterrent against a married woman incurring debts. Under Coverture (a doctrine in the British common law) husbands were liable for debts and other financial obligations incurred by their wives. Coverture was substantially modified over time, and finally eliminated (Stretton and Kesselring 2013).

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