

Thomas Hardy: A Powerful Voice against Social Injustice

Ratna Raj Laxmi

Ph.D in English, B.R.A Bihar University, Muzaffarpur, Bihar

Abstract:

There is no denying the fact that the era to which Thomas Hardy belonged was totally male-dominated and females had virtually no say as far as their social status was concerned. In the early 19th century Britain was an oligarchy. Only a small minority of men (and no women) were allowed to vote. Whatever amendments were made to the basic rights to vote during the later years were mostly in support of men. Poverty prevailed throughout England partly because of the impact of Industrialization and partly because of unprecedented immigration from virtually all over the world. Amidst this unexpected chaos the worst victim were the females who went on suffering from all sorts of atrocities. However, perhaps for the first time, through some of his powerful writings and conceiving of some of the life sized characters, mostly females, Thomas Hardy succeeded to a great extent in bringing about a transformation in the entire social and critical outlook towards women. The impact was so great that he soon became a powerful global voice for women's rights and their dignity. This article presents a brief account of the role of Hardy not only as a novelist but also as a powerful social revolutionary.

Key Words:

Industrialization, Protagonists, morbid psychology, Jude, Native, Victorian, Woodlanders

Presentation:

It would be quite helpful and pertinent to acquaint ourselves with the prevailing social conditions of England during the later Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century that built a fitting platform for such a sensitive writer like Thomas Hardy who designed his novels and conceived his characters that created not only a big controversy but also became a powerful voice against all that was illogical, unethical, pervert and insensitive in existing social practices and beliefs.

England suffered from the impact of Industrialization which resulted in virtually uncontrolled and unimaginable immigration from almost all over the world that paved the way for acute poverty and unstable social as well as political conditions in the country. There was sharp division between the upper and the middle class. Exploitation of the lower class went on unabated. Widespread atrocities against the women were reported from all parts of the country. Social injustice and political instability prevailed throughout and women, in particular were at the receiving end. The very title of his first novel *The Poor Man and the Lady* clearly indicated his outburst on class differentiation and social malpractices. Even though he had connections to both the working class and the upper classes, he did not feel that he belonged in either. He could no longer identify with members of the working class, and in spite of the fact that he made new friends in higher circles, he never truly adopted the attitudes and values of the upper classes. In fact, Hardy writes in *Jude the Obscure*, that ***"To have a good chance of being one of his country's worthies," a man "should be as cold-blooded as a fish and as selfish as a pig."***⁽¹⁾

Hardy also incorporates class issues into his novels through the creation of protagonists somewhat modeled after himself. These characters feel that their talents cannot be fully exploited and developed within the world to which they are born. Driven by a strong sense of ambition and self-discovery, these figures pursue their talents in a world socially higher than their own. Specifically, Stephen Smith in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, Clym Yeobright in *The Return of the Native*, Grace Melbury in *The Woodlanders*, and Jude in *Jude the Obscure* represent such figures. Through such situations, Hardy's works demonstrate the cruelty of social mobility, the perversity of class differentiation, and furthermore, the impossibility and the fruitlessness of completely detaching oneself from one's origins in an attempt to move up the ladder of social class hierarchy. Even the unfair treatment of Tess and her family is, in fact, not merely the injustice meted out to the lady in particular, but also it speaks a lot about the mass social discrimination and non-cooperation towards all common men belonging to the lower and middle class social strata. There are a lot of typical female roles against the background of Wessex in Hardy's works, for instance, Bathsheba in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Eustacia in *Return to the Native*, Tess in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Sue in *Jude the Obscure*, and Lucetta in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. They possess totally different characters, but all of them have the same things in common, that is these women always cannot fit into the

surrounded environment, and they live in poor conditions and they strive to escape from their current situation but end up with failure. Such protagonists reveal the real pathetic social, political as well as economic conditions of the contemporary middle class people. Hence, they are not individuals, rather universal.

The earlier novels of this highly sensitive artist received a somewhat indifferent response on the part of the British sophisticated minds exclusively because of its pessimism and unorthodoxy – raising objections and questions on premarital sex and the portrayal of women. They were received as a work of morbid psychology. Some of his novels met with even stronger negative outcries from the Victorian public for their frank treatment of sex, and were often referred to as obscene. They were heavily criticized for their apparent attack on the institution of marriage through the presentation of such concepts as Erotolepsy. The novels of Thomas Hardy are obviously serious outburst on certain social constraints that hindered the lives of those living in the 19th century. Considered a Victorian Realist writer, Hardy has examined the social constraints that are part of the Victorian status-quo, suggesting these rules hinder the lives of all involved and ultimately lead to unhappiness. In *Two On a Tower*, Hardy seeks to take a stand against these rules and sets up a story against the backdrop of social structure by creating a story of love that crosses the boundaries of class. We are forced to consider disposing of the conventions set up for love. Nineteenth-century society enforces these conventions, and societal pressure ensures conformity. But in course of time the great qualities of the novelist were realized by a section of the people. The intention of the artist was recognized in terms of deeper psychology of mysticism.

As far as the social condition of women during Hardy's time is concerned, it was really pathetic. Hardy rose against their exploitation and took strong exception to various ways of atrocities meted out on them in the male dominant society. The whole aura of the male dominance is reversed with Tess's murder of Alec, in which, perhaps for the first time by Thomas Hardy, a woman takes such an active and bold step against a man. Of course, this act only leads to even greater suppression of a woman by men, when the crowd of male police officers arrests Tess at Stonehenge. Nevertheless, for just a moment, the accepted pattern of submissive women bowing to dominant men is interrupted, and Tess's act seems heroic. Therefore, it is not surprising at all that this act of Tess created not only a big controversy but also shook and exposed the entire male dominant, upper class so called British respectability.

Conclusion:

Therefore, it has universally been accepted and acknowledged that Hardy, to a great extent, has his own influence on the entire elite as well as the sensitive and responsible minded lot not only of his own era but also on the generations that followed. Even the modern world does not have dare to defy what he propagated throughout his life. The characters that he conceived, exclusively the female ones, have successfully defied all the social taboos and become virtually a role model for the entire common lot. In one of his most controversial novels *Jude The Obscure*, when he talks about the outdated and malicious divorce laws, he, in spite of receiving strong opposition mostly from the urban upper class, instantly held the position of being a powerful voice for the cause of women. Many female characters in Thomas Hardy's novels clearly illustrate one of the Victorian stereotypes of women: the proper, submissive housewife or the rebellious, independent dreamer. Hardy does not demonstrate how women should be, but rather how society pressures women to conform to the accepted image. Hardy progresses from subtly criticizing society, as seen in *The Return of the Native* and *The Woodlanders*, to overtly condemning gender roles and marriage in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*.

To sum-up, viewing Thomas Hardy not merely as a writer who authored many a novel and poem, but also as great propagator and a voice against social injustice would perhaps be the most apt way to acknowledge his contribution to the entire intellectual world.

References:

1. Thomas Hardy - *Jude the Obscure*, (1895), Wordsworth Classics 2008 Ed. Chapter (43)

Books Consulted:

1. Thomas Hardy - *Jude the Obscure*, (1895), Wordsworth Classics 2008
2. Thomas Hardy - *Tess of the d' Urbervilles* (London 1950)
3. Emily Florence Hardy - *The Life of Thomas Hardy 1840-1928*, London Macmillan, 1965