

Tess of the D'Urbervilles: A Victim of Social Injustice and Male Dominance

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Abstract

This paper analyses how Thomas Hardy's novel "Tess of the D'Urbervilles" portrays the struggles of women within the patriarchal society of Victorian England. It explores the themes of class and gender inequality, highlighting the limitations imposed upon women by societal norms and expectations. The narrative focuses on Tess Durbeyfield, a young woman who becomes a victim of both male dominance and the rigid social hierarchy of her time. Through close textual analysis and a feminist theoretical framework, the research examines how Tess's interactions with male characters like Alec d'Urberville and Angel Clare exemplify the oppressive structures that define her relationships and ultimately shape her tragic fate. The study also considers the interplay of chance and circumstances in influencing Tess's trajectory, showcasing how her purity and resilience are challenged by the harsh realities of Victorian morality and societal prejudices. The paper argues that Tess's journey serves as a powerful critique of the injustices prevalent in Victorian society, particularly the sexual double standards and the devaluation of women based on their social status and perceived purity. By examining the novel through these lenses, this research offers a deeper understanding of Hardy's engagement with socio-political issues and his profound commentary on women's enduring struggle for recognition, autonomy, and justice.

Keywords: Struggle, women, rigid, harsh, Circumstances, relationship etc.

Introduction:

The very word patriarchy refers to the domination of man over women. The social system which enables man to dominate the women in all relations is known in feminist discourse as patriarchy. The patriarchal society believes that men are of superior power, so they have every right to subdue woman physically as well as mentally. Men are free to do anything while the women. are deprived even of fundamental rights because they are not regarded equal to men. So they are deprived of equal right, equal education and are not allowed to lead an independent life. Women are confined in such society within the Four walls of domestic sphere as if their sole responsibility is to bear and rear child and look after the domestic matters. As every child is born as 'shudra' so also in the words of Simon de Beauvoir 'one is not born but becomes a woman.' Her parents make her aware of her sex and acquaints her to her limited liberty and social norms which she can enjoy. This division of sex into inferior and superior is called gender-inequality.

In the concerned novel "Tess of the D'urbervilles" by Thomas Hardy an ample of examples of unlawful male authority over woman can be noticed. Tess, the protagonist of the novel is a typical Victorian woman. She is passive, weak, submissive, innocent, uneducated, simple,

conventional in thought and beautiful girl. Being the eldest child of the family, she was forced to assist her alcoholic and irresponsible father. In one of her such efforts she met with an accident resulting in the death of their horse, which was a source of bread for the family. She accepted the responsibility for the death of the horse. Taking advantage of her emotional attitudes, the parents forced her to leave her study and go to Alec to seek kinship: Tess's aim was to become a teacher, secondly she did not like to go to Alec but she had not right to go against the decision of her parents. In the words of Isam Shihada "the father had the power to dispose of his daughter in marriage at his own will and pleasure, without any regards to hers, and it was practically impossible for the girl to refuse compliance of the father preserved" Thus she became a medium of economic security for her family. Her father was very much aware of Alec's nature; even then he did not hesitate to play with the life of his teenage daughter. All these actions reflexed the real scenario of the Victorian Society. Alec in relation was her cousin. He tried to seduce her with money and physical charm. Tess knew the evil intention of Alec but tolerated only for the sake of the family. One day Alec raped her while she was asleep. This led to her pregnancy. She was severely criticised by the society and her parents for it, whereas the real culprit Alec was neither blamed nor did he undergo any punishment for his crime. He was set scot-free. It shows that patriarchal society "enabled men to subordinate and manipulate women". During Victorian period "women who had given in to seduction, living life of sin received the name fallen women". A child was born to her. Alec never wanted to marry her and bear the responsibility of a husband. The poor little child was not baptised by any priest as it was not born of marriage. But the child did not live long, he fell ill and died. The cruel attitude of Church and her parents forced her to baptize the baby herself.

After the death of her baby Tess left home for Talbothay's dairy where she came in contact with Angel who fell in love with her. In fact he loved for her beauty and considering her pure and spotless character. Tess who had not till then succumbed to her past, avoided Angel and tried a number of times to reveal before him her past life but somehow failed and ultimately got married. However, after marriage she disclosed to her husband but not before Angel's confession about his physical relation with a stranger. After hearing, her confession, Angel immediately abandoned her. He said "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 prestidigitation as that". The striking point here is Tess forgave Angel for his crime but Angel did not do so with her, because he too was a member of patriarchal society to which Alec belonged. Even though both of them had lost their chastity but punishment was inflicted only upon Tess while her husband was left unpunished. The difference was that gender led to the difference in the social judgement. Tess could have rebelled against the injustice done to her by her husband, but instead she followed the order considering him of superior sex. She did not dare to challenge the norms of conventions, for which she had to suffer a lot.

After being dishearted by Angel, Tess was leading a hard life in her parents' house. In the mean time her father had died. So the entire responsibility of the family once again came to her shoulder. While Alec, her seducer had become a missionary. On finding her leading an independent life and hearing her story he took full advantage of her helplessness and persuaded her to be his mistress. He assured to safeguard her family financially. Tess initially did not agree to his proposal because she still loved her husband. But she had no way left before her. For the

sake of the family, she ultimately submitted to Alec. So once again she became an easy victim of him. But she still waited with a faith that her husband, her love, would one day realize his mistake and would come to her. And it really happened so. Tess could not control herself because for the second time she was losing her love. Out of anguish she stabbed Alec. She was hanged for the murder she committed. Thus, Tess's parents, Alec, Angel and in fact entire patriarchal society converted her life in to hell and ultimately led her to tragic death. Now, question that comes to our mind is why had Hardy done so much injustice to Tess who was innocent and did not have any fault of her own! She represents the women sex of the age. It seems Hardy did not dare to go against the social convention of the time, because he too belonged to that patriarchal society to which Alec & Angel belonged. "A female is physically weaker no doubt, but the novelist has made them weak mentally too by making them face responsibilities and adverse situations created by patriarchal society." It is, also possible that he does not like women to be free and independent.

Most of his novels reveal that he wants women to be economically and physically dependent upon males. That is why after dissertation by Angel, when Tess was leading an independent life with her family, she was emotionally blackmailed by Alec. Her surrender to Alec shows that Hardy does not want to see woman independent. That is why Hardy has not given his heroines the fundamental rights also. They have been given only the power of tolerance to every suffering inflicted upon them happily and silently. Alec's continuous pressure to her to be his mistress was not to be the saviour of the family but to satisfy is physical lust. "It was his selfishness which led him to bear the responsibility while it was Angel's ego which encouraged him to reject her as responsibility." "Women can lead a solitary life without any one's support but it is men and the society which become an obstruction for them. The patriarchal society whose rules are meant for establishing men's superiority over women are finally responsible for women's suffering".

No doubt Hardy has given enough space to draw the character of Tess. but at the same time deprived her of adequate power to fight against the patriarchal parents, Alec, Angel and the Victorian Society. Hardy shows full sympathy towards female. But inspite of showing interest in their sufferings, is not with them. He always remained with the Patriarchal Society and its conventions as the fate of the heroines indicates.

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