



## Women Subjectivity in the Novel's Thomas Hardy

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The term 'women subjectivity' airstrikes at the question where a woman looks for her position, self, importance of her being to others and existence. When a woman seeks her own self in society, she undergoes a psychic process including a wide array of sentiments, moods, views, discernments and sensations. Her heart and mind both yearns for significance of her role pertained to others in family and society. It cannot be denied that women suffered a lot and sacrificed their desires and gladness for the fulfillment of her responsibilities. In return to it, they didn't get recognition but only insult and abuse. Hardy in his novels also pronounced such female characters that lead incomplete life and are submissive and feeble in front of man.

Thomas Hardy belonged to Victorian age and as such his creations are bound to reflect the temporal and spatial reality of the prevalent culture and society. The study of the social settings of Victorian society undoubtedly flings light on the fact that in Victorian age, women were deprived of their rights, existence and freedom. They were subjugated by men as they were born and lived in patriarchal society. They did not have liberty and autonomy to decide for them or choose their partner in life. On the contrary they were treated like puppets in the hands of men, their lover, husband or father. Having a second-rate position, Victorian woman suffered a lot from exploitation, pressure and masculine ego. Victorian society was characterized by the utmost implication to morality in terms of female sexuality but on the other pole it did not follow any restraint to man. No doubt Victorian society followed binary standards, one for male and other for female. Hardy in his novels has showed his concernment for the questions which pertain to women subjectivity.

Far From the Madding Crowd, Hardy presents Bathsheba, beautiful young woman at the center of the novel, who is wooed by three very different suitors. Her character throws light on the question of woman subjectivity that she tries to find out in the society of Weatherbury. She as the protagonist pushed the plot through her interaction with her various suitors. At the starting of the novel, she is

bankrupt but soon inherits property of her uncle and acquires to canter a farm in Weatherbury. She is described slight vain, rash and impulsive. Hardy writes:

**The red-jacketed and dark-haired maiden seemed**

**to think so too, for she carelessly glanced over him, and told her man to drive on. She might have looked her thanks to Gabriel on a minute scale, but she did not speak them; more probably she felt none, for in gaining her a passage he had lost her her point, and we know how women take a favour of that kind. 1**

Gabriel Oak pays the tuppence for her to pass through the turnpike. She carelessly ignored him. She stands for a new woman of nineteenth century craving for independence and emancipation. She herself guides her labourers and has great love and charm for nature. Her conversation with Oak shows her to be capricious, spirited young woman who has never been in love. She admits that she would like to have all the trapping of marriage, she would delight in a piano, pets and her own carriage, she would enjoy seeing her name in the newspaper's marriage announcements but she objects to the concept of having a husband in the first place after losing her freedom. She says: **"I hate to be thought men's property in that way"**<sup>2</sup> but next time she further remarks: **"It would n't do Mr. Oak. I want somebody to tame me; I am too independent; and you could never be able to, I Know."**<sup>3</sup> However, not only she is liberated in spirit, she is financially independent also. This lets Hardy to use her character to reconnoiter the peril that such a woman faces of losing her individuality and regime through matrimony.

Bathsheba is so likable and mesmerizing even today. It can't be her beauty because beauty without intellect becomes rapidly dull. Rather, it's the convolutions of Bathsheba's character that outline her as extraordinary and bewildering. Her plea for independence and to determine her own lot indubitably potshots her as a proto-feminist. The novel brings out unlike facets of her personality – as tease, as tomboy, as mistress of the farm, as manager of men which are allowed to make a prodigious impact on the mind of readers. She is feminine, an intelligent, well-educated and independent young beauty. To some extent she can be described as narcissist. She is a lady of self-esteem as she herself decides her partner however he cheats her. She blindly believes in Troy. She shamelessly pursues him and marries him. Hardy writes:

**...Bathsheba loved Troy in the way that only self-reliant women love when they abandon their self-reliance. When a strong woman recklessly throws away her strength, she is worse than a weak woman who has never had any strength to throw away.**<sup>4</sup>

After marriage Troy takes an easy release from army and comes to live a life of luxury, leisure and amusement. Troy proves to be irresponsible, selfish and opportunist. Bathsheba's self-esteem is shattered into pieces when she comes to know about affair between Troy and her maid-servant, Fanny

Robin. He is undeniably a man of philandering nature. It is the irony of Bathsheba's destiny that she is caught in his trap. When she asks what she is to him, he says, **"You are nothing to me nothing... A ceremony before a priest doesn't make a marriage. I am not morally yours!"** 5 These words are more catastrophic and heart-rending to Bathsheba.

Every married woman regards it her privilege to occupy the foremost place in her husband's mind and heart but it is Troy who invectives her feelings. Troy's authoritative behavior towards Bathsheba and Fanny Robin represents for present-day documentations and precincts that check woman's self-reliance and buoyancy. Troy is reported to be dead by drowning in the river. Everyone believes in this rumour. He again appears in the evening party to claim for his abandoned wife and now Boldwood, his rival shoots him dead. This is how he brings crisis in the life of Bathsheba.

Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) spotlights the cruel truth of Victorian society's treatment of women. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* begins with auction-scene that explores the issue of female suppression as a function of capitalism. The incidents narrated arise mainly out of three events occurred in the real history of the town called Casterbridge and the neighbouring country. They were sale of a wife by her husband, repeal of Corn laws and the visit of Royal Personage to the aforesaid part of England.

It was apparently in March 1884, some nine months after his return to Dorchester that Hardy began reading systematically through back files of the local weekly newspaper, *Dorset County Chronicle* and *Somersetshire Gazette*. He seems to have begun with the issues of January 1826, and his "facts" notebook suggests that by the summer of 1884, he had gone through the issues for late 1829 and early 1830. During this long intimate exposure to a particular period in the past of the country town and the surrounding countryside he came across several items which he was able to incorporate in the novel. Hardy noted down various contemporary happenings as the young man, who tapped at night on his fiancée's window and was stabbed through the glass by the girl's father, who thought that he was a burglar; the man who returned to his native village after twenty-seven years of absence, found his wife married to a second husband, and simply settled down again to live by himself in the same village. In his 1895 "Preface" to *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Hardy points out:

**The incidents narrated arise mainly out of three events, which chanced to range themselves in the order Tand at or about the intervals of time here given, in the real history of the town called Casterbridge and the neighbouring country. They were the sale of a wife by her husband, the uncertain harvests which immediately preceded the repeal of the Corn laws, and the visit of a Royal personage to the aforesaid part of England.**6

The existence of such practices as the story of wife-selling was well known and common in contemporary society. At Buckland, a labouring man named Charles Pearce sold wife to shoemaker named Elton for \$5 and delivered her in a halter in the public street. Henchard's wife Susan appears as a weak woman who is totally dependent on Henchard and thenafter on Newson who buys her from Henchard. She does not have her independent existence. She represents for those contemporary housewives who were the victims of male dominance, affront and harassment. In the first chapter, He remarks that he too has almost ruined himself by marrying at the early age of eighteen. His wife Susan

tries to stop him from talking in this way. But Henchard becomes more and more reckless till he offers to sell his wife for five guineas to anybody who will offer that amount to him: "**Here I am waiting to know about this offer of mine. The woman is no good to me. Who'll have her?**"<sup>7</sup> A young sailor named Newson has by this time arrived in the tent. He agrees to buy the woman for the amount mentioned by her husband. The woman warns her husband that she and the child will go away with the sailor if her husband persists in his foolish proposal. But Henchard is not in his senses. The result is that the bargain is struck. The amount of five guineas is paid to Henchard by the sailor. The sailor then walks out of the tent with Susan who also takes away the baby named Elizabeth Jane. After taking this oath, Henchard sets out to search his wife and daughter, but the search proves futile.

Their relationship smacks of stale familiarity. "Hardy recognizes the psychological temptation of such a sale, the male longing to exercise his property rights over women, to free himself from their burden with virile decision, to simplify his own conflicts by reducing them to 'the ruin of good men by bad wives.'" <sup>8</sup> Irving Howe in his book *Thomas Hardy* analyses Henchard's intention in selling his wife. In selling his wife Henchard is regarded to fulfil a masculine desire, "**To shake loose from one's wife; to discard that drooping rag of a woman, with her mute complaints and maddening passivity; to escape not by slinking abandonment but through the public sale of her body to a stranger, as horses are sold at the fair; and thus to wrest, through sheer a moral willfulness, a second chance out of life.**"<sup>9</sup> Henchard tries to avoid responsibility and blames his drunkenness and breakdown in reason for selling his wife. But there are hints to show that auction of Susan have been premeditated. Henchard says:

"I am a good experienced hand in my line. I'd challenge England to beat me in the fodder business; and if I were a free man again I'd be worth a thousand pound before I'd done O 't'."<sup>10</sup>

Henchard is disgruntled because he is ambitious and thinks that his family has prevented him from making a fortune. Susan mutely suffered her insult. Even after eighteen years, she again returns to Henchard. Newson is reported lost at sea off the coast of Newfoundland. She has no option to earn livelihood for herself and daughter, Elizabeth.

Henchard now is the Mayor of Casterbridge. Henchard apologies and in order to make amends, he sends a note to Susan with five pound notes and five shillings, the same amount that he took from Newson.

**He sat down at the table and wrote a few lines; next taking from his pocket-book a five-pound note, which he put in the envelope with the letter, adding to it, as by an after-thought, five shillings. 11**

Although conducted in his library rather than in his business office, this act looks suspiciously like another cash transaction on the part of a merchant who makes his living by buying and selling commodities, and knows to a penny what it will take to make a purchase. Even the narrator notes that Henchard's gesture of enclosing the bank-notes and coins "**may tacitly have said to her [Susan] that he bought her back again.**"<sup>12</sup> The remarriage of Susan and Michael Henchard is the invention of what Hardy terms 'business-like determination'.

Another woman, Lucetta loses her senses and then life caused by the terror of Victorian morality. Lucetta being a complete sophisticated character represents the new world. She is a daughter of an army officer with no mother to look after herself. She is a charming young woman with accomplished mannerism. She can speak French and Italian fluently. She belongs to high-class and assumes poses. She is unconventional and well-educated. She falls in an affair with Henchard and that's why New Jersey woman suddenly comes into the possession of a lot of money left to her by a rich aunt who has recently died. Now she decides to stay at Casterbridge. One day, she writes a letter to Henchard to come and meet her in the absence of Elizabeth Jane. On the contrary, The Scotchman intending to meet Elizabeth-Jane comes there and meet Lucetta. She has love-affair with Henchard. But next-time, she falls in love with Farfrae and also marries him. She says to Henchard :

**....don't – don't be cruel! I loved him so much, and I thought you might tell him of the past-and that grieved me. And then, when I had promised you, I learnt of the rumour that you had-sold your first wife at a fair, like a horse or cow. How could I Keep my promise after hearing that ? I could not risk myself in your hands; it would have been letting myself down to take your name after such a scandal. But I knew I should lose Donald if I did not secure him at once-for you would carry out your threat of telling him of -our former acquaintance, as long as there was a chance of keeping me for yourself by doing so."**<sup>13</sup>

These words show her craving for self, freedom and individuality. She does not scumb to Henchard as she says: "I won't be a slave to the past. I, ll love where I choose! <sup>14</sup> Henchard who is keen to marry her, finds her attitude completely changed and evasive.

he is just opposite to Susan and Elizabeth who do not response to male oppression. But Victorian society did not sanction her peaceful marriage with his lover, Farfrae as the chapter XXXVI describes that Henchard hands over the packet of Lucetta's letters to Jopp and asks him to go and deliver it to Lucetta. But, Jopp having a vague suspicion in his mind, opens the packet and finds love- letters written by Lucetta to Henchard. Having come into possession of such a precious secret he cannot resist the temptation to read out some of the letters to a gathering of bad characters at Peter's Finger inn situated in Mixen Lane. These bad characters thereupon resolve to take a skimmity- ride which will expose the past love- affair of Henchard and Lucetta to the public eye. In such a way Henchard

commits a serious error of judgement in handing over the packet of letters to Jopp and asking him to deliver it to Lucetta.

In **the** chapter XXXIX the makers of Peter's Finger Inn has decided to arrange a skimmity- ride in order to expose the love affair which once existed between the ex-mayor Henchard and the wife of present mayor. The incident described in this chapter is almost sensational. The skimmity- ride is taken out and the past love-affair between Lucetta and Henchard is thus exposed to all the onlookers. Lucetta herself, on seeing the procession from a window, says to Elizabeth- Jane: **“A procession- a scandal- an effigy of me and him! .... Donald will see it! He is just coming home- and it will break his heart- he will never love me anymore and O it will kill me – kill me!”**<sup>15</sup> Lucetta then falls into a swoon and her condition becomes critical. This incident vividly describes narrow mentality and limitations which the contemporary people had for woman. It is she not Henchard who writhes in excoriation. She asserts her individuality and identity but becomes an unfortunate victim to the ironies of fate. The Skimmity-ride arranged by the group of bad characters killed Lucetta. Her death is indeed tragic.

On the other hand , Elizabeth-Jane like Lucetta did not get public hatred and ridicule .But she suffers a lot because of malignant fate as she lost her real father Newson and came to henchard with her mother. Her mother remarries henchard and then she with her mother comes to live in the house of Mayor. Henchard wants that she should behave like Mayor’s daughter in outlooks, etiquettes and fashion. First, he asserts that Elizabeth will take his name without baulking. He dominates her in order to mould her personality like high- class girls. He insults her for not having written "a line of chain-shot and sand-bags" when he comes to know about her that she is the daughter of newson , he behaves with her very harshly. He also threatens

Farfrae not to court Elizabeth. Henchard ‘s domineering treatment forces Elizabeth to leave the house of Mayor and she comes to live with Lucetta. She is polite, dignified and a lady of self –respect. It is irony of her fate that Farfrae comes to meet her at Lucetta’s house but he meets Lucetta and falls in love with Lucetta. Readers appreciate her for her patience and self – esteem as she does not complain against Lucetta however she loves Farfrae.

*Tess of D’Urbervilles* was published in 1891, it followed such acclaimed novels as *The Return of the Native*, *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Like the novels which preceded it, *Tess* also portrays Wessex region. The novel explores the conflict between Victorian traditional social norms and the forces of human love and sexuality. It portrays a powerful picture of women oppression and exploitation caused by masculine ego and power that Alec parades over Tess. It is also claimed that Hardy is emotionally involved with its main character. Several biographical and critical studies prove that Tess was in part modeled after one of Hardy’s distant cousins. Tess can be regarded as a daughter of declining rural England which Hardy loved. In the autumn of 1890, *Tess* was scheduled to begin serialization in the *Graphic*, but serialization was delayed for six months because of editors’ demand that Hardy make broad revisions in sections of the novel considered as scandalous for

its readership. Now Hardy was not happy over the required changes because this thing struck at the root of the intent of the work. For example, the scene of crucial seduction which concludes the first portion of the novel, was changed to a mock marriage in the serialized version. This thing shows contemporary rigid protocols in context of feminine sexuality.

As the story starts, Tess Durbeyfield arrives at her village cottage in Marlott one evening to find her father in an excited state. That day, her father, John Durbeyfield has learned through a village parson that his family name hails from a noble line of gentleman known as D'Urbervilles. His family represents the last of this great lineage. The parson also informs him about the existence of a rich woman in the nearby town of Trantridge who has the surname D'Urbervilles. This disclosure makes John Durbeyfield full of self-esteem and within a short time, he sends a boy to fetch a horse and carriage to carry himself back home. On the way, he chants slowly waving his hand; **“I ve – got – a – gr’t – family – vault – at – kingsbere – and knighted – fore – fathers – in – lead – coffins – there.”**<sup>16</sup> Now Tess feels embarrassment at this attitude of her father.

Now Tess's parents who are well aware of their daughter's physical charms, decided to send her to Trantridge to claim kin with the supposed relative. However, Tess initially refuses to take part in this plan but a turn of circumstances alters her mind. An incident brings catastrophe in the life of Tess as she goes to market to sell bee-hives and her horse 'Prince' dies on the way. It was nothing but her misfortune which later becomes primary cause of her tragedy. Now she blames herself for the loss of family's livelihood. In such a mental conflict, she prepares herself to go to Trantridge. When Tess arrives at the Trantridge mansion, she meets Alec D'Urberville, son of the rich woman.

Now, Tess finds a job of tending fowls in this family thinking that in future she will be able to earn enough money to buy a new horse. Step by step, Tess's misfortune is dragging her to the path of her own undoing. Soon Tess involves herself with the customs of workfolk of Trantridge.. One Saturday-night while she is returning a little late, because the group of people with whom she usually walks home, are drunk. Alec, a well-mannered rogue, hotly pursues Tess. He offers her a ride on his horse and takes her to a remote part of the woods where she can no longer find her way on her own. Alec professes his love for her and tells her that he has sent gifts to her family trying to win her through them. Now Tess also expresses her gratitude for him. She insists upon him to let her go home as soon as possible. It is quite late at night. Alec promises that if she just stays with the horse, he will wander around and find a landmark to get his bearing and take her home. She agrees to his plan. But she does not know where her fate is dragging her as Hardy comments:

**But some might day, where was Tess's guardian angel?  
Where was the providence of her simple faith?  
Perhaps... he was talking, or he was pursuing or he  
was in a journey or he was sleeping and not to be  
awaked.... As Tess' own people down in the those  
retreats are never tired of saying among each other in  
their fatalistic way. 'It was to be.'**<sup>17</sup>

Tess falls asleep on a nest of leaves near the horse. When Alec returns to Tess in the dark and fog, she is sleeping there and he takes that opportunity to have his way with her. Her innocent view of the world that there is some essential goodness in man, is gone because of what he did to her. Alec does not seem to feel any remorse for what he did to her. From the moment of her seduction, Tess hopelessly struggles against the odds of life. Now Tess becomes a mother of child without marriage.

On her return to her parents after that unhappy event, she is overtaken by a deep feeling of depression as: "I wish I had never been born."<sup>18</sup> When her baby dies, the parson tells her that she cannot bury the child because the child has not been baptized. Now during the night Tess cannot bear the thought that her child will have no salvation and then, she performs a baptismal service herself, in the presence of her young brother and sisters. The baby is buried in a neglected corner of the churchyard and Tess bravely decorates her child's grave.

Her unfavorable fate has snatched happiness and peace from her life. Now she sees no beacon of hope. She asks to herself as:

**Was once lost always lost really true of chastity? She  
would ask herself. She might prove it false if she could  
veil byones. The recuperative power which pervaded  
organic nature was surely not denied to maidenhood  
alone.<sup>19</sup>**

These lines denote that she yearns for a change after the bitter experience. She gets an opportunity to work in a dairy and she hopelessly gets a job as a milkmaid in the Talbothays dairy. She meets and falls in love with Angel. Angel proposes her for marriage. Tess loves Angel but she does not want to cheat him. But because of constant persuasion and pressure, at last she agrees and a wedding is planned. But before marriage, she writes a letter explaining what happened with her and slips it under Angel's door. But by chance the letter is struck beneath the carpet at the edge of the door. Angel never got it. After marriage, Angel comes to know about her past. This thing brings catastrophe in her life as Angel is not ready to forgive her. He goes to Brazil.

Again Tess desperately continues her life with a hope that one day her husband would surely come back. But it is an irony of circumstances that Alec again appears to drag her on the path of ruin. He constantly pursues her and confesses that he is still enchanted by her beauty. Tess denies and declares that she does not love anyone but her husband. It is during this desperate period that Tess's father John Durbeyfield dies leaving family without the means to maintain their lodgings. Under the pressure of these critical circumstances, Alec make a promise of money for her family, now Tess agrees to live with him as his wife. On the other hand, during his sojourn, Angel has realized his mistake and has forgiven her. He returns to Tess but his return throws Tess in a state of wild desperation in which she murders Alec and flees



with Angel. She remarks: “**O’ you have torn my life to pieces... made me be what I prayed you in pity not to make me again.**”<sup>20</sup> Now Tess has got her true love and she seems not to care for her life that might soon come to an end. The novel in the end, shows Tess’s punishment i.e. death by hanging. She is more sinned than sinning. The novel throws light on current hollow beliefs and regulations which were applied to create pressure and dominance for women.

Hardy’s women characters skirmish for self-fulfillment and recognition in the society that was surpassed by masculine ego and superiority. Hardy displays his sympathy for female characters as he defends Tess and calls her ‘a pure woman’. He asserts that she is pure at heart. She is the victim of her ill fate. Though, Thomas Hardy received bitter criticism for supporting female characters in his novels by the high- brow critics who championed the cause of patriarchy yet he dauntlessly moved with his female characters shedding the light of illumination on them to expose the reality of the then prevalent society.

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