

# **DISCLOSING THE HARD REALITY OF HARDY'S VICTORIAN SOCIETY AS PORTRATED BY SUSAN, THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE**

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## **Introduction**

Reading Thomas Hardy's fiction is like travelling across the realm of Victorian society unfolding its various colourful layers to the traveller. The strength and beauty of Hardy's fiction is primarily rested on his art of characterization which is deepened by both women characters and rustic ones. In fact, the most significant facet in the oeuvre of Hardy's fiction is his portrayal of women characters through which one can easily have a trace of the socio-economic, socio-political and socio-familial norms of the society of his time. Reading his novels is like understanding the various prevailing sex-related issues, social bindings including marriage, the strong hold of man folk upon the society so called patriarchal hegemony and the sufferings of woman folks under these conventions in his Victorian society, so called Hardy's Wessex world. Amidst these social conventions silently crept into the Wessex life a hugely important social movement or awakening of women presently known as feminism which emerged in Hardy's England and took much attention of people and which requires a separate discussion so far realism in his novels is concerned. Moving in and around the Wessex territory Hardy observed the social life and in his writings gave vent to the feelings, cries and ambitions of the women folk living under pressure in the man ruled society.

Characterization is another determining factor in the study of realism in a literary work, in the art of which Hardy's mastery is seldom questioned. Once we open the door of memory, a large train

of his great characters stand before us. Not only great male characters such as Michael Henchard, Angel Clare, Alec d'Urberville, Donald Farfrae, Clym Yeobright, Jude Fawley, Gabriel Oak, Henry Knight, Giles Winterborn, Tillotson, Troy, Jorelyn Pierston, but also female characters such as Susan, Tess, Sue, Elizabeth Jane, Eustacia, Bathsheba, Elfride, Vivietta, Grace, Marty etc. come sweeping by and inhabit our mind and heart. In Hardy the most alive of men are the creatures of intellect and the most alive of women are the creatures of passion. Passion, emotion, intellect and reasoning are all embodied in Hardy's characters. In the context of realism in characterization Harold Williams in his article *The Wessex Novels of Thomas Hardy* published in *The North American Review*, Jan, 1914 comments that Hardy's novels "close on a great note which thrills the imagination with the poetry of an emotional truth to life."<sup>i</sup> (quoted in *North American Review*)

*The Mayor of Casterbridge* is one of the finest novels penned by Thomas Hardy which gives a reader an access to his Victorian world. Casterbridge is Hardy's fictitious name for the capital town of Dorchester. Hardy was born and brought up in a rural background; the sights and sounds of his surroundings went through his veins, which afterwards came out in the form of writings – poetry and novels. The somber beauty of country and quaintness of peasant ways and thought penetrated his spirits and became the very ground and substance of his imagination. Commenting on the realism as implicit in his novels it is said in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Halicar - Impala) Vol- II that there is almost no passion in his work, neither the author nor his characters ever seeming able to pass beyond the state of curiosity, the most intellectually interesting of limitations, under the influence of any emotion. In his feeling for nature, curiosity sometimes seems to broaden into a more intimate communion.

"The heath, the village with its peasants, the change of every hour among the fields and on the roads of that English countryside which he has made his own – the Dorsetshire and Wiltshire "Wessex" – mean more to him, in a sense, than even the spectacle of man and woman in their blind and painful and absorbing struggle for existence"<sup>ii</sup>.

Hardy's acute focus on the truthful depiction of life attracts the attention of readers and critics and develops in them excessive interest in him resulting in study and research work on his novels throughout the years. John Bayley in his *An Essay on Hardy* (1982) suggests an insightful

approach to Hardy as a poet and novelist and also discusses the vital ingredients of eroticism and humour and the unusual ways in which passiveness, 'pessimism', and anthropomorphism function in the poems and novels. E. A. Baker in *The History of English* (1987) stresses on the conflict between man and nature. H C Duffin in his *Thomas Hardy: A Study of Wessex Novels, the Poems and the Dynasts* (1963) gives much stress on Hardy's characterization and style. In *Women and Sexuality in the Novels of Thomas Hardy* (1991), Rosemarie Morgan provides a discussion on sex and harassment of women, along with giving a particular insight into Hardy's handling of Nemesis in *Tess*.

As a modern writer Hardy made a humble effort to present a truthful picture of his Victorian society. With regard to Hardy's realism a lot of studies have been done till date dealing with different aspects of his novels. However, a further study is still a necessity on the social life of Victorian rural England as reflected through his Susan, a major character in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. So the present study will help to explore the unexplored aspect of the character delineation of Susan in the novel in the novel cited.

In this study a humble attempt is made to explore the darker sides of Hardy's Victorian society as presented through Susan, one of his major characters in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. With that, it is also attempted to see the traditions and cultures of Victorian England as reflected through the character. Since any research study demands scientific method to be followed to reach the destined goal, the present study is a literary one and for making it effective and fruitful, some distinct approaches such as descriptive, analytical have been adopted. Secondary sources have also been referred to for making the study complete and result-gaining.

## **Discussion**

One of the familiar aspects that we witness in Hardy is that almost all his major Wessex novels start with presentation of his 'native life' - his small village Dorset and town Dorchester, and that presentation is carried through as the story progresses and ends. The very first chapter of *The*

Mayor of Casterbridge presents a vivid familiar picture of South West England, the area to which Hardy gave the name Wessex:

"One evening of later summer, before the nineteenth century had reached one-third of its span, a young man and a woman, the latter carrying a child, were approaching the large village of Weiden-Priors, in Upper Wessex, on foot"<sup>iii</sup>

It is that very region which in the eyes of Susan the woman

"might have been matched at almost any spot in any county in England at this time of the year"<sup>iv</sup>. Through the eyes of Susan the place seems familiar – a road neither straight nor crooked, neither level nor hilly, bordered by hedges, trees, and other vegetation, which has entered the blackened-green stage of colour that the doomed leaves pass through on their way to dingy, and the nearest hedgerow boughs, are powered by the dust that has been stirred over them by hasty vehicles, the same dust as it lay on the road deadening their footfalls like a carpet; and this, with the aforesaid total absence of conversation, allowed every extraneous sound to be heard.

Susan in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is a victim of patriarchal hegemony, thrust into the mould of an archetypal sufferer. She is a typical Victorian peasant wife whose docility and loyalty towards her husband cannot be put into question. Her docile nature makes her weaker to raise a strong protest against her husband's socially negligible act of bringing into the stage of monetary bargaining. Despite her repeated but weak protest against his taking excessive wine, Henchard keeps on drinking to the state of being completely intoxicated. Out of his reckless state Henchard sells his wife to the unknown sailor named Newson. Her frail resistance with the warning that she would walk out on Newson has no effect upon Henchard and she goes away with her daughter Elizabeth leaving him alone. Susan here suffers the sufferings of a woman who is the victim of the patriarchal set up in which the male voice is the law. However, most of Hardy's readers would find it hard to believe in the story of wife sale which also calls forth harsh criticism from many critics who regard that Hardy's novels are but full of improbabilities. But such a criticism upon Hardy in terms of the story of wife sale for instance is immediately refuted

if we go back to the novelist's contemporary time. This wife sale is traditionally sanctioned the evidence of which we can trace from his time. Just a few years ago before Hardy wrote the novel, that is, in 1881 "the last recorded wife sale took place in Sheffield."<sup>v</sup>(quoted in Morgan) In this context of selling one's wife and Hardy's treatment of realism behind introducing such a story in his novels, Penny Boumelha says:

"Michael Henchard, in selling his wife and daughter to the sailor Newson, repeats in a startlingly blatant form the definitive patriarchal act of exchange."<sup>vi</sup>

Even the later re-union between Henchard and Susan is built upon the miasma of wretchedness on the part of the weaker 'other'. Not just Susan, but the women of the novel – all of them, from Susan to Lucetta and to Elizabeth Jane

"are at once the instruments for the probing of the significance of Patriarchal power for the male."<sup>vii</sup>

In the character of Susan is observed a typical woman of liberal feminist group of Hardy's Victorian England, for whom a woman's true destiny lay in fulfilling the role of wife and mother, marriage being the woman's highest vocation. Being a simple follower of the patriarchal conventions Susan yields herself to the state of selling herself to the unknown sailor and follows him after a weak and mild protest towards her still unknown destination. Again as a mother she does not forget her duty and responsibility towards her daughter Elizabeth. After learning that her new husband Newson has reportedly lost and died in the sea, Susan feels much concerned for the future and security of her daughter. The supposed death of Newson ravages the canopy of her home, which forces her to come back to Henchard since he is a man and her former husband. Marriage is the means of attaining shelter under Henchard and so she formally gets remarried to him. Her scare related with the safety of Elizabeth becomes much heavy when she is dying and so she writes a letter to Henchard requesting him to read it after her marriage since she has the fear that Henchard might be rude towards Elizabeth after learning the truth that she is not his daughter but Newson's. Thus a scared Susan writes a most serious and heart-touching letter:

"Michael Henchard, - For the good of all three of us I have kept one thing a secret from

you till now..... I shall be in my grave when you read this, and Elizabeth Jane will have a home. Elizabeth Jane is not your Elizabeth Jane - the child who was in my arms when you sold me....this living one is my other husband's.....forgive, if you can, a woman you once deeply wronged, as she forgives you." <sup>viii</sup>

Commenting on Hardy's treatment of realism in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* G.D.Klingopulos says:

"...such a response, in which the reader is carried along by the swift concentration of events, by the reality with which the town, its business, its taverns, its river, and its people are created, is achieved by *The Mayor of Casterbridge*... The power of the novel is in the density and confidence of its localization, and the sense of historical reality which the action derives from being put back to the years before the repeal of the Corn Laws (1846)."<sup>ix</sup> (quoted in Ford)

Klingopulos, in support of Hardy's treatment of realism, goes a step further when he says: "Hardy was not a deliberate realist, but he could not help writing with rich particularity about the town of Dorchester. The result is a tale in which the typical quality of the characters is more than compensated for by the poetic clarity of the setting and episodes..."<sup>1</sup> (quoted in Ford)

The character delineation of Susan presents that typical Victorian outlook which accepts the stereotype of conformity in women who do not rebel against the established socio-familial norms. However, there was gradual decline of that outlook and the Victorian women gradually became disillusioned with such conventions. The portraiture of Susan is a hint of gradual uprising of the notion that women would seem to be getting tired of what they call the tame and monotonous sphere in which they were confined and of the demand that the same range of active life and personal freedom should be opened up to them which is allowed to men. It is but the harmonious co-operation of the two distinct influences of manly force and womanly tenderness and spirituality, and not the confounding of them in one common form, which kept society sound and strong.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

## **Conclusion**

What we easily come across more clearly through Hardy's women characterization is the socio-political sphere of Victorian England which was, at that time, governed by various sections of opinion on women folk. The character of Susan represents the conservative patriarchal opinion of Victorian society which was unable to dispense with the sexual double-standard and to which the female sexuality still presented a threat to the dominant culture which "refused to grant women the opportunities granted to men."<sup>2</sup> With that, it also gives some hints of the rise of the liberal feminist group which agitated for equal rights with men. Significantly, the majority of the liberal feminists joined forces with the prominent emancipationist, Millicent Garrett Fawcett in upholding the view that

"woman's true destiny lay in fulfilling the role of mother and wife, marriage being the women's highest vocation."<sup>3</sup>

To sum up, Susan is a fine example of Hardy's truthful presentation of Victorian society which unfolds before us the conventional patriarchal hegemony in its acute form. Reading *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is like witnessing various social norms of Victorian England.

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<sup>2</sup> Morgan, op cit. pp. 14-15

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

Research paper

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<sup>i</sup> *The North American Review, : Vol – 1999, No. 698,, Jan., (USA, University of Northern Iowa, 1914), pp.120-134*

<sup>ii</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol – II (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc.,1966), p.98*

<sup>iii</sup> Thomas Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (New Delhi : UBSPDP Ltd., 2002), p.9

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid, p.11

<sup>v</sup> Rosemarie Morgan, *Women and Sexuality in the Novels of Thomas Hardy* (London : Routledge, 1991), p.189

<sup>vi</sup> Penny Boumelha, *Thomas Hardy and Women: Sexual Ideology and Narrative Form* (Sussex : Harvester Press, 1982), p.3

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid, p.23

<sup>viii</sup> Hardy, op cit. p.153

<sup>ix</sup> Boris Ford ed., *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature, Vol- VI* (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1958), .415.