

# Women Predicament in Thomas Hardy's Novels



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## Abstract

It cannot be denied that in the Victorian era, females were associated with domestic sphere. Women's rights and privileges were extremely limited in this period, not having ownership of their wages. When Victorian men and women married, the rights and privileges of the women were given to their husbands under the laws of that time. All the rights of women are represented by their husbands to control all the properties of women. It was considered legally right for men to dominate their wives. Victorian women were neglected financially and sexually in that society. In that time, women endured their husband's abuses, sexual violence and cruelty etc. Women could not raise their voice for their rights in till Victorian era. The discrimination between men and women could be seen in all areas of life. In that time, the concept of feminism has increased in every aspect of life and all the writers started to think about feminism and wrote their works in context predicament of women. Thomas Hardy is one of them and delineated the problematic issues of women whether these are against to women or not. The main aim of feminism is to deconstruct the relationship of power between men and women. In order to maintain equal status in society, both the genders have great important. Thomas Hardy has used different aspects of women in his novels as sexual abuse, cruelty, elopement and all forms of violence which were being faced in all the periods till Victorian era.

**Keywords:** Silent –Suffering, Women and Victorian Era.

## Introduction

Thomas Hardy is one of the greatest novelists in Victorian period. He delineates all the sociological obstacles of Victorian era in his novels which were being faced by women in that time. His novels highlight all the problematic issues of that time such as rape, sexual harassment and other forms of violence. Thomas Hardy wrote great novels such as *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874), *The Return of the Native* (1878), *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886). All his novels highlight tragic characters struggling against sociological obstacles of Victorian period. Through his novels, Hardy shows the feminist aspects and discloses the problematic contentions of society which were being faced by women in Victorian era. Feminism is the main approach which advocates women in regard of equal treatment in male dominated society. Actually, feminism was first advocated by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of woman* (1792). Feminism advocates the uplifting of women's rights in society and it has given a new direction to women in society. Feminism is a serious approach to advocate equal status of women in this world of discrimination with regard to gender inequality. Several feminist movements and ideologies are being developed for many years and even writers represented feminist ideas in their works to improve the serious plight of women in society.

## Aim of the Study

The aim of this paper is to expose the relationship between victim and victimizer in society, relationship is determined by the power structure of the society. Those who are in power who victimize the powerless people, his novels show the serious conditions of women in male dominated society. This paper shows all facets and obstacles of society which are being faced by women in Victorian society as rape, domestic violence and patriarchal system etc. The aim of this paper is to analyze the discrimination between men and women which can be seen in each sector of society. Actually, the relationship between man and woman is based on power and sexual attractions. We see that women in male dominated society are marginalized by different excuses of society; but Thomas Hardy

exposed the problems of women and represents them in prime position in his novels. Hardy's treatment of women characters shows the reflection of Victorian era and his women characters represent all the women of society. The main aim of Hardy's novels was to vegetate the seeds of women's rights through different women characters such as Tess, Bathsheba and Susan etc.

#### **Review of Literature**

Related works of this research paper have been reviewed for purpose of writing this paper, especially, the works of Caitlin Moran, Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche, Ramji Lall and Anandh Raj. Ramji Lall in his critical book of *Tess of d'Urbervilles* describes that women were supposed to keep sanctify their virginity before marriage and if their virginity is lost, they are considered immoral in patriarchal society whether there is any fault of girl or not. In *How To Be a Woman* (2011), Caitlin Moran wants to say that women should stop to see feminists as radical man-haters but they should think about them as advocates for true equality. In *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014), Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche describes that feminists is not an affront, but rather a label that should be embraced by all. In *Tess of d'Urbervilles* (1891), Thomas Hardy's novels move around the rights and privileges of women in Victorian era. Actually, we see in this novel that Tess is raped by Alec and later she is considered immoral by society but other Angel Clare also involved with a girl but he is not considered immoral. Tess is a poor girl who does not have any affair with man in society. She is so innocent that she couldn't protect herself from the lustful manner of Alec. When she is raped by Alec, she doesn't have courage to tell anyone and cannot raise her voice against patriarchal society. However, when she tries to conceal the lustful manner of Alec in front of her husband, it is considered immoral in that time and even her husband does not realize the reality of her life. **angel**

#### **Predicament of Women**

As the novel begins, we see that the impact of male dominated society on Hardy and his women characters can be seen clearly. In *Tess of d'Urbervilles* (1891), Tess has been represented as marginal in patriarchal society and she is shown to raise the voice of all women in regard of her society. When it is said that Durbeyfield family belongs to ancient noble family, the d'Urbervilles in neighbour village then John Durbeyfield wants to join that family. Mean while, Tess joins some girls of that village in the May Day Dance. After some time, Tess is sent to the d'Urberville estate for any work due to financial problems and it is expected that Mr. d'Urberville will give a new direction to her life. But Mrs.d'Urbeville does not give any respect to Tess and they don't consider any kind of relation with Tess. In d'Urberville estate, Mrs.d'Urberville's son Alec tries to seduce her but Tess ignores his lustful manner. However, in adverse condition, Tess has to spend several months at Urberville mansion. One day, Alec goes in fair with Tess and Alec goes in the woods while they are returning from fair and impregnates Tess. She comes

home to her family to give birth of Alec's child and she names it Sorrow after giving birth and he soon dies. Tess faces many obstacles in her home because everyone considers as Tess has committed wrong in her life instead of giving attention towards Alec's lustful manner. After that she tries to find any work in her village, finally she gets a job as milkmaid at the Talbothays Dairy in nearby village.

In The Talbothays Dairy, Tess enjoys a period of happiness and contentment. She has joined the company of her three fellow milkmaids –Marian, Izz and Retty in dairy farm. Where she meets a boy named Angel Clare, who likes to Tess and when Angel proposes to Tess, initially she ignores the proposal of marriage but later she accepts the proposal of Angel Clare. After getting their marriage, Angel tells Tess about his past affair with a older woman, Tess also wants to confess her past as Alec had raped her forcefully in woods but Angel could not forgive her, Tess forgives Angel for his past whether his mistake was genuine or not. Tess is again left stunned by her own husband who believes in double standard of morality. Actually, it can be seen that when a man maintains his physical relationship with any woman, he is not treated with hatred as women are treated in society. Through the relationship between Angel Claire and Tess, we learn practically the marginal facet of women in male dominated society as Angel considered himself pure man and Tess an unholy girl. However, Angel knows fully about her that the mistake which occurred with Tess was her, but of Alec because she was raped forcefully. Hardy questions about this matter, if a girl is raped then how she is considered impure in society?

When we go through all novels, it can be seen that the situations and circumstances of Hardy's heroines are changed according to themselves. In his novel the *Far from Madding Crowd* (1874), Bathsheba Everdene agreed to marry Boldwood but after that she realized that Sergeant Troy is a better life partner for her and she rejects the proposal of Boldwood and associates with Sergeant Troy. His novel *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) focuses on the life of heroine rather than a hero, which is usually customized in almost all Hardy's novels. In this novel, Bathsheba attracts three very different suitors and forms a love triangle between the dashing young soldier Sergeant Troy, common man Gabriel Oak, and middle aged farmer Boldwood. This is only Bathsheba Everdene to whom three men are trying to persuade her and want to marry. In Hardy novels, men are given second position for highlighting the values of women. This justifies the perception of a novelist who gives prime position to female characters for highlighting the obstacles which are being faced by women in society. All the heroines are characterized as well educated, having good manner and maintain an appropriate attitude towards opposite sex in society. Hardy's novels pertain two types of personalities rustic and educated. In his novels, Hardy delineates girls of rural areas in such a way that they have great understanding toward society and respect to all the people of society. Hardy is clever enough to show

attraction and sympathy for all characters in his works. In all his novels, Hardy represents male characters - Henchard, Oak, Wildeve, Alec etc. in such a way as they are not given their identity and they often move around their women counterpart. Without the heroines, the novels could not have gained so much popularity. Actually, we see that women were not provided the rights and privileges of freedom, most of the heroines were marginalized in the man dominated society and they did not follow the norms of the society. But Hardy has given prime position to women characters in his novels. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, we see that Tess has to face many obstacles which have been rooted for long time in Victorian society. Tess becomes a victim of other guilt but no one in society has positive thinking about her. Actually, she did not want to go d'Urberville mansion, but conditions and circumstances force her to go there and that was happened with her due to her fate. In this novel, Tess has taken all the emotions and sympathies of the readers and her hardships are so exorbitant that they have touched the emotions and sentiments of all the readers. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), Henchard is a drunkard and sells his daughter and his wife for only five guineas. He often cursed his wife Susan for his misfortune. Hardy delineates the norms of society that women were considered merely as animals and they have no hopes and wishes; they just have to work for the prosperity of other beings around them. All his novels show the real problems which are being faced by women in male dominated society. Women are considered as other in context of society as Simone de Beauvoir has said in her feminist text *The Second Sex* (1949). In this book, Simone de Beauvoir says in context of women as "One is not born, but rather becomes a Woman." Women are neither respected by their family nor the society, they are considered as slaves for the welfare of their family. Actually, even the fate doesn't favour her. They are always ignored and tortured by everyone in society.

### Conclusion

It can be said that all the novels of Thomas Hardy delineate the rights and privileges of women of Victorian era. Thomas Hardy was able to create the ideology for advocating females in Victorian society. In his novels, female characters have been represented as heroines or protagonists instead of antagonists. Firstly, feminism has been advocated by Mary Wollstonecraft while the plights of women were not good in every field of life. Actually, before Mary Wollstonecraft, no one has written about the rights and privileges of women. After that, several writers have given their attention towards women and wrote about women's rights in their works. As Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker etc. have given a new direction to English literature in context of feminism. Actually, these feminist writers have given prime values to women characters in their works.

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