

## The Passive Feminine Ideal in Elfride Swancourt in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*

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### ABSTRACT

The article displays how Hardy like Irigaray gives space for feminine specificity the essay illuminates the variability of feminine identities in Hardy's novel *A Pair of Blue Eyes* which addresses tensions between identities and essences, which are sometimes imposed, sometimes embraced, and sometimes re-casted. Events in the novel are drawn to evince how Hardy endeavors to corroborate how women are pre occupied with the difficulties of fulfillment and self definition in man's world in order to claim an identity between self hood and wife hood. Elfride Swancourt exhibits the tensions and conflicts of bourgeois women which give insight into the construction of women, male identification of women and the middle class social hegemonic dominance during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The article Endeavors to show that the ideal of femininity challenged by Elfride cannot be concluded as an effort to attain equality by subverting the family and the male power but a striving to transform phallogocentric society which women exhibited at the turn of the century.

**Key words:** Femininity, passivity, feminine ideal, Victorian ideology, self hood

Hardy's novels show how women are pre occupied with the difficulties of fulfillment and self definition in man's world in order to claim an identity between self hood and wife hood. The 19<sup>th</sup> century world was awakened intellectually, the novels depict female beauty and sensibility, it awakens fully to their needs, it also illustrates that the actualization of such needs were difficult. Understanding of the feminine in the Victorian context facilitates to understand the depiction of femininity and the compulsion on the authors to present such an image. The Feminine is germane, incorporates the right and the responsibility for creating a community. Femininity in the Victorian era was viewed as the hall mark of a lady, invoking images of love and warmth. . Feminine revolves around domestic responsibility, motherhood, beauty, demeanor and marriage. Beverley J. Rasporich quotes Susan Brown Miller's description of femininity,

Brilliant subtle, aesthetic that was bafflingly inconsistent at the same time that it was minutely, demandingly concrete, a rigid code of appearance and behavior defined by do's and don'ts (XVI)

Beverley finds that such description provides a general understanding of the feminine that is rooted in sociology of gender. The early and mid Victorian fiction was essentially domestic it endorsed the ideals of motherhood and marriage. George Eliot, Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, depict little signs of change in the political and social order. The novelists' depiction of women involves positioning the female sexuality in a new way and liberating its representation from masculine domination. Woman's internalization was encouraged by society and man, such promptings were a major hindrance to woman and realization of it made woman articulate without faltering and Victorian novelists in making their woman speak, show how woman endeavored to come out of the constraints and their struggle to fight their way out of representative ideas. Women characters in Hardy's novels figure differently from the early Victorian novels; the passivity that dominates the early Victorian novels is fairly absent in his novels. Impediments, reassurance and avidity are essential qualities that make it distinct. The ideal of femininity is challenged by Elfride it does not mean she wants to attain equality by subverting the family and the male power but wants to transform phallogocentric society which women exhibited at the turn of the century.

Elfride Swancourt's place in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* is precarious, as she is caught between the desire of two men, Stephen Smith and Henry Knight. The rigid moral schemes are vocalized by Henry Knight in his insistence for pristine and prude woman. The dire instance of Elfride endorses the impairing of inflexible moral codes to a transitional young woman's conduct. Her baffled scheme of relationship with men show Elfride's inconstancy her past association with two obscure male rivals who were desirous of Elfride, Felix Jethway who is dead in the grave and Lord Luxellian a widower and her current affair with two male protagonists- Stephen Smith whom she rejects due to patriarchal pressure and her marriage to Henry Knight who rejects her for her having a faded past. The events in the novel illuminate the patriarchal structure and social politics. Hardy by placing the male in a kind of social order that aids to define the male position is subtly hinting at the supremacy men have in the patriarchal world. Elfride's acquaintance with these men, define their position and their relation with the heroine. Her progression is seen in moving from a farmer, to an architect, to a Knight, to the Lord, but such development only marks her catastrophe. Her feminine identities in these occasions are varied. A careful scrutiny of the eponymous heroine corroborates that Hardy has depicted her not as powerful but as docile and feminine.

She had lived all her life in retirement the - *monstrari digito* of idle men had not flattered her, and at the age of nineteen or twenty she was no further on in social consciousness than a urban young lady of fifteen....As to her presence it was not powerful; it was weak...Elfride was no more pervasive than a kitten.  
(1)

The evocation of the feminine ideal in Elfride is faced with an array of possibilities that go to show her as not only as a transgressor but also as one adhering to the feminine notions. Why were women so confused? Why were they so undecided? A question that Hardy does not answer, this elusive stance of Hardy teases the reader. The dilemma in the reader is the dilemma which Hardy's women face. It is this trait that attracts us to revisit and interpret. Hardy's sensitive descriptions of Her manner, thought and attire show that she was overbearingly feminine; femininity was inferred in the dress she wore. A discerning insinuation of the import that awaits feminine passivity and sublimity is evinced in the opening chapter. The Victorian woman was clad according to the dictates of the male and woman was still an articulation of obvious consumption and leisure. Dress was an indication of gender inequality, inevitably subordinated to the male gaze. Elfride's dress is depicted as conservative that endorses a Victorian ideal, "She appeared in the prettiest of all feminine guises...to Stephen Smith" (11) The feminine sensibility is evoked in her innocence, her inclination for passionate tenderness, her uncrystallised nature which serves to buttress domestic virtues that attract Stephen Smith.

The description also affirms that femininity is the source of physical existence; and it seeks eternal involvement. Feminine, is ubiquitous it is both invisible and unknowable; the allusions to Madonna Della Sedia, the mortal and immortal Rubens are allured to render the rumination and deliberations of Elfride. She exhibits the tensions and conflicts of bourgeois women; her condition gives insight into the construction of women, male identification of women and the middle class social hegemony during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Hardy draws whole attention to her eyes "These eyes were blue; ...A misty and shady blue that had no beginning or surface." (1) The quaint descriptions enforce one to apprehend Elfride as an artificial construct. She has not been authoritatively or strongly framed as Ethelberta in *The Hand of Ethelberta* or Bathsheba in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, she is denied the authoritative construction. Most Victorian novelists (Charles Dickens, Thackeray, and George Eliot.) enhanced the beauty of their heroines to encode a patriarchal ideology. The search for the appropriate husband becomes a prerequisite for the heroines as it was the only way woman could free herself from the precarious condition of being a single woman.

Elfride's allurements to Stephen is the attraction of any young girl whose acquaintance had not gone beyond Endelstow village. Her innate talent for creative reproduction shows her adept at writing; her pride in writing sermons for her father. Elfride nurtures her behavior, her desires according to the patriarchal dictates; the subtle display of surveillance and defiance show the inconsistency in Elfride which is a display of feminine beauty and sensibility. Her dominance and power on Stephen demonstrates her superiority and power on men. Her decision to elope with Stephen is a daring attempt made by a village bred girl of nineteen and Hardy gives her the power to choose and the power to defy the male order. Luce Irigaray opines that the concept of female sexuality is derived on the basis of masculine parameters. Elfride's desire to think and choose is clogged by her father; Mr. Swancourt's emphasis on genealogy and patrician reminiscences changes his estimation of Stephen. She is forced to sacrifice her love to fulfill the paternal desire, illustrating how the inflexible moral codes rule the transitional young woman. However her comparative immunity from further risk and trouble had considerably composed her.

Her inconsistency is proven in her choice of Henry Knight and rejection of Stephen Smith. She acts by will, follows the dictates of her mind but lacks the will to pursue her wish. Her desire for marriage is feminine; the feminine desire in Elfride is frustrated by Mr. Swancourt's regard for class structure and later by Knight's insistence on prudery. To Mr. Swancourt it is Elfride's degradation "...to be known as the wife of Jack Smith the stone mason's son... It is the drawback not the compensating fact," (69) Hardy reflects the thoughts of woman in the transition, torn between the conflicting claims of self hood and woman hood. Woman according to Lacan does not exist because man desires, and woman submits. Psychological analysis by Freud swept the western world to believe women as passive and that female submission arises due to the physiological conditions. Toril Moi, rejects every effort to define femininity she states that "Feminine" represents nurture and female nature" and hence affirms that "femininity is a social construct." (204) Feminine qualities incorporate moral values and Simone De Beauvoir, says, (1953)

She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental ... He is the subject, he is the absolute – she is the other. (qtd. Farganis 5)

Elfride's adherence and surveillance to Henry Knight is to show how inspite of her advanced, vital and zealous gradation she is the incidental and the 'other.' Hardy is echoing the social and religious structures that are largely responsible for the perception of the feminine. Elfride's volition to construct a Romance novel articulates her avidity to enter the public arena. Her artistic rendition is frustrated by the harsh sarcasm, Mr. Swancourt who dismisses her work as flat copies. Henry Knight her husband, a hardcore Victorian cannot resist the verity of Elfride's artistic pursuance, advises Elfride to end her artistic desire, as he can associate with a woman in print not in reality advises, "...confine yourself to 'domestic scenes' .....That a young woman has taken to writing is not ... the best thing to hear about her." (117)

Elfride fails to display defiance; she is mesmerized by Knight's advice. It's probable that Hardy hints at woman's flaw in allowing men to rule them, skillfully inquiring if man is solely responsible for women's subjugation. The possibility of a fair reply is difficult, Feminists can attack men for their chauvinistic mind-set but they may fail to convince women not to be a victim of male autocracy. Dominance is found in every era and Henry knight is no exception. Geoffrey Harvey affirms,

Hardy replicates the Victorian sexiest ideology of woman as the weaker sex, and as the mysterious other. At the same time, he puts this ideology into contradiction by the way each of his women is trapped within the male gaze, with resulting complex vision. (148)

Harvey's comment shows how Elfride is broken on the wheel of man's egotism. Stephen her equivalent in everything except in social status, is marginalized, rejected on the basis of class by Swancourt, and Elfride's desire to be dominated and controlled by the scholarly Henry Knight.

Elfride's docile devotion to Knight was now its own enemy (246) Hardy hints at the paradoxical situation of the feminine. Her devotion towards Knight stops her from retaliation she suffers from the burden of an over-evolved sensitivity. Her condition echoes Catherine Belsey's, findings,

Femininity is the criterion which Cixous uses to define 'otherness' and femininity is not gendered in anatomy. On the contrary, it is situated in language and culture. The difficulty, then, is not with individual men or women but with patriarchy. It is patriarchy that imposes male privilege. (10)

To the Victorians there existed two types of women the pure and the fallen. Elfride's elopement with Stephen goes against the ideal of femininity makes her unfeminine or the fallen which Knight refuses to accept. Knight's reaction reminds us of Nietzsche's belief that the feminine power submits to the will and desire of the masculine. Nietzsche restores the image of the cat to define the feminine trait, he says,

Woman's great art is lie; her highest concern is mere appearance and beauty.....Woman has much reason for shame; so much pedantry, superficiality...petty licentiousness and immodest lies concealed in woman. (qtd Burgard 1)

To nurture such beliefs would certainly create much harm; they are the most discredited aspects of his thought not apt descriptions of the feminine. Knight's rejection of Elfride only affirms that he evaluates her act as petty, licentious and immodest. Elfride by not confiding her past mistake goes to substantiate Nietzsche's view that woman's great art is lie but her fear of society and fear of losing Knight makes her conceal her past deed. Knight's rejection of Elfride for having an affair with Stephen only affirms that he evaluates her act as petty, licentious and immodest. Edward Neill comments,

In a sense, Knight falls foul of sexuality, slips up on its slop. His emotional intelligence is well to the rear of his theoretical lore, given his vulnerable awareness that he is no graduate of cupid's college. (27)

Elfride's submissive conduct was seen as the feminine ideal but this may have been because of her lack of social consciousness and Hardy demonstrates the passive feminine ideal in her silence. Paranoid by Knight's linguistic dexterity; the once flighty, vibrant, loquacious, she is smothered and trampled by male atrocity. Edward Neill appraises her decline and precipitation as similar to what Helen Cixous terms as a 'Personne' that is to say declined from a 'person' who was 'so living' 'to nobody' (21).

## Conclusion

The description of Elfride Swancourt is deftly carved to show her assertion, submissiveness, her artistic rendition, her intellectual verve, her flippancy which subtly hints at the varied identities responding to the situation. Careful scrutiny enunciates that it is a self-conscious narrative that

complicates the very understanding of women. Fiction depicted woman in varied ways while some confirmed to the proper feminine image others presented an image contrary to the feminine image. Owing to such confusion it is hard to term her as the deviant woman as her conduct does not conform to the 'cult of womanhood' framed by the Victorian ideology or the angel in the house. But one can only comprehend that Femininity is displayed in her act of diffidence and boldness, and Elfride responds to the diverse cultural configuration of woman's oppression, passion, and resistance. Women were left with fewer choices to exonerate themselves because one could not wholly transgress the ideals of femininity formed by patriarchy. Feminine signs developed in the narrative not only confirm to acquiescent notions of femininity but also corroborates her reaction to such notions. It would not be an overstatement to state that Hardy subtly hints at the overbearing influence of cultural, ethical and gender discourse that cast a new light on Victorian feminine identities through the delineation of Elfride.

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