

Women of Character: A feminist study of Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*

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Abstract: This research paper attempts to explore the depths of the character of women as depicted in one of Thomas Hardy's most renowned novels of all time, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. As the reader gets acquainted with the rise and fall of the 'Man of Character', i.e., Michael Henchard, the women involved in Henchard's life expose the cultural and social pathos of patriarchy and female subjugation embedded into the Victorian Era. The Victorian society's unfair treatment of Susan Henchard, Lucetta Templeman, and Elizabeth-Jane Newson speaks volumes of the existing biases against the so-called fairer sex. Patriarchal hegemony makes itself apparent in the display of ownership traits by men in positions of husband, father, and partner. The novel brings to fore the grim reality of the male-dominated society where women are subjected to auctions, skimmity-rides, and abandonment. It is despite such suppression that the women in the novel emerge as women of character through their struggles. Through the layered characterization of women, Hardy denounces the patriarchal hegemony of the Victorian Society that rejoices in victimizing women. The rise of feminist movements in the 19th century for women's right to vote, right to reproductive care, etc. called for a novel perspective for analyzing the position of women. This paper examines the English tradition of domination of women, and the way women in the Victorian Era struggled to exercise their right to happiness.

Keywords: *character, ownership, patriarchy, subjugation, women, Victorian*

The truth of your character is expressed through the choice of your actions.

-Dr. Steve Maraboli

Thomas Hardy's novel, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), carries the stamp of the era it represents as the subtitle suggests; it is about, *The Life and Death of a Man of Character*, a man whose life was undeniably shaped by his actions directed towards women or by the actions of women around him. Even though these women are of relevance throughout the story of Michael Henchard's life, it is the man that the title gives credit to, reflecting the 19th century's treatment of women, and their significance or the lack thereof in the Victorian society. As the quote at the beginning suggests, one's actions are fundamentally representative of one's character; the reader is acquainted with the protagonist, Michael Henchard in rather unusual circumstances, the auction of his wife, Susan at a fair at Weydon Priors. While it raises questions about the character of the man himself, the immaturity of young age and his inebriated state also become apparent. The most striking is the fact that Henchard thinks he has the right to command such an auction, effectively explaining how men assumed ownership of women in those times. It's not just Susan but also, their infant daughter, Elizabeth-Jane that gets caught up in this wretched affair. The idea that it isn't the first time Henchard has made such a proposition speaks volumes about the lack of respect for women in general and the lack of love in their relationship in particular. Early on in the novel, Hardy mentions the theme of the conversations going on in the tent;

"The ruin of good men by bad wives, and more particularly, the frustration of many a promising youth's high aims and hopes and the extinction of his energies by an early imprudent marriage..

" (The Mayor of Casterbridge, p6)

Adding to this is the noise of an auctioneer selling old horses in the field outside the tent. It is in response to this auction that Henchard speaks of wanting to sell his own wife and how marriage at an early age prevented him from becoming the man he was meant to be. Hardy in effect points out the Victorian Era's dismal attitude towards marriage and towards women as a burden. The fact that Henchard never stops for a moment to consider the ramifications of the proposed auction shows how the well-being of women was seldom a point of concern. The nonchalant reaction of those who witnessed this gruesome auction illustrates that such auctions had perhaps happened before and were not uncommon. When one of the men present in the furmity tent praises Susan's virtues, Henchard questions the man's wisdom instead of examining his own attitude towards the possessor of those virtues. Even after being warned by Susan, he chooses to

go ahead with the auction. This gives us the first taste of Henchard's "bitterest temper" and his impulsiveness that provokes him to sell his wife to the sailor, Richard Newson. Hardy contrasts this unacceptable vicious behavior with the moving display of affection by the horses waiting to be auctioned. The narrative comes full circle at this point as it was the horses' auction that had prompted Henchard to think of auctioning his wife. While Henchard chose to drown his senses in alcohol and exercise the right given to him by patriarchy, i.e., the right to dominate and abuse women; the mute animals' exhibit gentleness that questions the so-called superiority of the human race. As Elaine Showalter says,

"The Mayor of Casterbridge begins with a scene that dramatizes the analysis of female subjugation as a function of capitalism..."

It is under this moment of duress that Susan Henchard, a young mother, and a troubled wife, then transforms into Susan Newson, thinking in her ignorance that such a baffling auction is legal and binding. This ignorance is conditioned by the social and cultural norms of the Victorian era that dictated women to please men at all costs. Education was not easily accessible to women and there was a dearth of institutions working towards the betterment of women. Susan's plight represents the marital abuse a number of women were subjected to, thus explaining the need for the Married Women's Property Act (1870). Susan is so fed up with her conditions that she even says,

"Mike....I've lived with thee a couple of years and had nothing but temper. No, I'm no more to 'ee. I'll try my luck elsewhere."

It speaks of how their marriage hadn't been pleasant from the very beginning. Henchard commodifies her repeatedly and she decides to take the matter in her own hands by leaving with Newson. The next morning Henchard thinks it is all a delusion until he finds the money from the auction in his pocket. Even then, he blames Susan's "meekness", her "idiotic simplicity", and the alcohol abuse for the transaction. He does not account for the fact that Susan's meekness and simplicity was a result of centuries of subjugation that prevented women from thinking for themselves. His inability for honest introspection stops him from acknowledging his obdurate pride as the real instigator of the appalling sale. Ian Gregor in *The Great Web: The Form of Hardy's Fiction* (1974) talks of Henchard's character,

"He (Henchard) affects the life of other characters is in making us feel they are never allowed to live and breathe apart from him"

While Susan and Elizabeth- Jane do manage to survive without him, Newson's death forces them to return to Henchard after 18 long years. It is in this narrative silence of 18 years that Hardy initially hides Elizabeth- Jane's illegitimacy. Elizabeth- Jane's complicated illegal origin puts her

doubly at a disadvantage. As for Susan, she's no longer the meek woman who had left a drunken Henchard at the fair. Susan is now clever enough to hide Elizabeth-Jane's true parentage at least till her death. She even manages to convince Elizabeth Jane to not change her name from "Elizabeth-Jane Newson" to "Elizabeth-Jane Henchard" as a mark of respect for the sailor, who was her real father. Susan is well aware of Henchard's emotional instincts that would force him to provide for his wife and child. Her calculations are proven right when Henchard writes to her after getting to know of her arrival in Casterbridge, he includes 5 pounds and 5 shillings, the same amount that he had auctioned her for. It is not only out of guilt and shame, but also his traditional sense of duty.

"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... 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"

It emphasizes how deeply the concept of ownership of women had been internalized. However, when Susan meets Henchard in the eerie location called, "The Ring", she insists that she meets him now only as Newson's widow and that she would have never come back to him if it hadn't been for Newson's death. The formerly "meek" Susan now shows signs of confident independence. Her self-assertion and cold detachment from Henchard is indeed remarkable. Even though she has suffered at the hands of her husband and the patriarchal hegemony, she shows the strength of her character in her ability to secure a safe home for herself and her daughter despite being destitute. She uses the flawed patriarchal system of the Victorian Era that inhibits women from being independent and makes it obligatory for men to take care of women, to subtly make Henchard realize how he too shares the responsibility of Elizabeth-Jane, in spite of the fact that Elizabeth-Jane is not actually his daughter. This shrewdness comes partly from years of experience and partly from her maternal instinct to protect her daughter.

Henchard remarries Susan not out of love or affection but, out of guilt, duty and obligation; the entire affair is characterized by its staleness and the "strict mechanical rightness". Even the townspeople do not approve of Henchard's choice of wife as Susan does not fit the traditional bill of a merchant's wife. She is neither beautiful in the conventional sense, nor is she rich or in possession of any social status, which overall makes her an unfit match for their mayor. The townsfolk's opinion about Susan mirrors the social pathos of Victorian Era that prioritizes superficial aspects of transient nature like beauty and money over intellect and character, equating women with mere status symbols like houses and cars today. While assuming that in marrying Susan, Henchard is "lowering his dignity", they overlook the fact that Henchard is merely making up for his past crimes of abandoning his wife and child to a stranger at a fair. Henchard's renewed sense of responsibility has to be credited to Susan who does everything in

her power to make things right. It is much similar to Hester Prynne's actions in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, where when condemned by her Puritan neighbors, she chooses to be strong for the sake of her daughter. Hester, too, like Susan, hides the truth about her daughter's father in order to protect her daughter. By revealing Elizabeth-Jane's true parentage on death-bed, Susan atones for her lies to Henchard, whereas, by not following her instructions with regard to the letter, Henchard chooses to disrespect his wife even in her death. Susan is unsatisfied with the subservient roles assigned to her by the society and emerges as a woman who seeks dignity and respect from society in general and her husband in particular.

Society's harsh treatment of Susan is much similar to that of the second woman from Henchard's past, Lucetta. Lucetta, too, is a woman who has suffered at the hands of the cruel conservative Victorian society that questioned even a woman's right to love. Her brief affair with Henchard in New Jersey costs Lucetta her reputation, her character and eventually, her chance at a happy life. While Henchard buries this affair in the depths of his secret past, continuing with his life with utmost normalcy, Lucetta is offered the semblance of a fresh start only after inheriting property from her deceased aunt. It is then that Lucetta Le Sueur transforms into Lucetta Templeman who now resides at the prestigious High Place Hall in Casterbridge. Now, by conventional standards, Lucetta has been bestowed with all the essential ingredients of a respectable lady, i.e., beauty, wealth and status; yet she is under the impression that it is only through marriage to Henchard that she can be redeemed for her sins as society deems an affair fit to be a determining factor of her character. Initially, she attempts to renew her connection with Henchard by sending him letters and through her friendship with Elizabeth-Jane. She is convinced that only Henchard can free her from the ghosts of the past and that he is her only chance at a respectable life. In many ways it not only represents how women had been inured to accept the victimization they were subjected to by the Patriarchal forces, but also the immense internalization of the emancipation, where it was only through men that women could achieve any semblance of happiness. A victim of her past, the moment she realizes she's in love with Farfrae, Lucetta is troubled by the fear of public exposure of her relations with Henchard. It is Lucetta's fear of public humiliation that Henchard capitalizes on by blackmailing her to marry him. It is important to note here that Henchard shows no such fear of exposure, while Lucetta repeatedly goes out of her way to ensure that their affair remains a secret in Casterbridge. Bert G. Hornback talks of how,

"She (Lucetta) tries to break from the bonds of her past, and this destroys her."

While what essentially destroys Lucetta is the society's intolerance for any deviation from established norms. However, Lucetta's circumstances and her outlook are now changed, she is not only her own mistress, but she's a woman in love. While Hester in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, remains buried under the burdens of her past affair for major part of her life, Lucetta says,

"I won't be a slave to the past—I'll love where I choose!"

thus reflecting the strength of her convictions. Lucetta realizes that marrying Henchard for the sake of her history with him would be a mistake, as neither is she poor and dependent as she was before, nor is she particularly fond of him as she detests his hot temper. She is now a much better judge of character as she knows that Henchard wishes to marry her not out of pure love, but out of a sense of charity. She understands the value of love she found with Farfrae and wants to protect it. The fact that she is forced to hide her past from her beloved husband is indicative of the gravity of the stigma attached to an unmarried woman's affair. The skimmity ride organized by Joshua Jopp and some of the townsfolk to publicly criticize adultery shows the detrimental impact of redundant traditions that seek to humiliate without consideration. The skimmity ride crucifies Lucetta for a crime she did not commit as her relation to Henchard belongs in her maiden past. It is this loss of social validation that triggers her seizures causing her to lose both her unborn child, and eventually her life. Like Susan, Lucetta too, on her death bed reveals the entire truth to Farfrae, to which Farfrae's reaction is full of disdain. He is convinced that it was perhaps for the best that Lucetta died as the possibility of them living together happily after the reveal was highly unlikely; showing how Lucetta had probably loved him more than he deserved. While many believe that Lucetta suffers for the crimes of her past, and that the skimmity ride is a part of her Karma as she is a characterless woman, what most fail to see is that Lucetta was simply a woman who is made to pay the cost of love each time she tries to seek happiness. Her affair with Henchard tainted her reputation irreparably, so much so that she couldn't get rid of it even later in life; it was her love for Farfrae which forced her to reject Henchard thus sowing the seeds for further turmoil. Admittedly, if the affair with Henchard was such a blunder on Lucetta's part, the world offered her no avenues for making mistakes and learning from them, a privilege that all men, irrespective of time and age can undeniably boast of. While her love for Henchard caused her to earn the tag of a "characterless" woman, her love for Farfrae made her vulnerable to an exposé. Thus, we see how Lucetta was simply a victim of the times, which denied women the right to love, the right to be happy. In the end, Lucetta was a woman who lived and died for love. As an American social activist, abolitionist, and leading figure of the early women's rights movement Elizabeth Cady Stanton remarks,

"Woman's degradation is in man's idea of his sexual rights. Our religion, laws, customs, are all founded on the belief that woman was made for man."

Elizabeth- Jane has a slightly different fate than the tragic ones of Susan and Lucetta. She is an illegitimate girl child in a world that is already ill favored towards the female gender. She gets a taste of the privileged life before her mother's death, with proper nutrition, clothing and rest; she blooms into one of the most coveted flowers in town. It is only after Henchard realizes the truth about her true parentage that thorns appear in her path. Although Henchard generously decides to

not hurt Elizabeth-Jane by telling her the truth, his anger towards Susan for having lied to him prevents him from giving Elizabeth-Jane the fatherly love and affection she deserves. While she is as devoted to him as one should to be one's father, Henchard finds faults in the smallest of things about her, from her language to her handwriting, and effectively makes her life miserable. Henchard even objects to her friendship with Farfrae and instructs both of them to stop it immediately. Henchard's censure worsens to the point that Elizabeth- Jane leaves his home to live with Lucetta as her housekeeper at High Place Hall. It is then that Farfrae's calculative nature comes to fore as he choose Lucetta over Elizabeth- Jane, presumably for Lucetta's superior wealth and social status despite the fact that Elizabeth-Jane is certainly superior to Lucetta in terms of knowledge and intellect and shares his beliefs. After one of their very first encounters, Hardy says,

"He seemed to feel exactly as she felt about life and it's surrounding- that they were a tragical rather than a comical thing; that though one could be gay on occasion, occasions of gaiety were interludes, and no part of actual drama. It was extraordinary how similar their views were."

Farfrae disregards this compatibility in favor of wealth and status. His rejection hurts Elizabeth-Jane to the core and yet she finds the strength to endure it without complaining. She cares for, and understands Lucetta despite of Lucetta's relationship with Farfrae. Elizabeth- Jane in many ways is an embodiment of modern feminism that includes the need for women supporting and uplifting women. She lives her life with utmost dignity and enviable independence. When ignored by all surrounding her, she taught herself the lesson of renunciation and worked harder on self-improvement. She chooses not to cry or beg at anyone's doorstep and utilizes her skill set to create a life for herself. As Henchard's health and fortune decline, Elizabeth - Jane devotedly takes care of him and instills in him a new spirit for life. From years of experience, and extensive study, Elizabeth- Jane is now not only capable of running a business, but also making important decisions that turn that business into a profitable one. After Lucetta's death, when Farfrae and Elizabeth- Jane renew their connection, Elizabeth- Jane no longer shows signs of naiveté; she is now a self-assured woman, who knows her worth. Elizabeth-Jane's transformation from a delicate flower to a woman of substance shows how if given the opportunity, access to education, and exposure, women, irrespective of the era, have the potential to carve a niche for themselves.

While 'Character is Fate' may be true, we see how characters of women are often disfigured on the basis of phallogocentric patriarchal customs, obsolete traditions aimed at dominating and controlling women. A loyal wife, Susan is sold off at a fair by a husband who refuses to take her wants or needs into consideration, and later the society deems her unfit, lowly for that very husband. Lucetta is lambasted for the crime of adultery which she isn't even guilty of; the patricentric norms create enough pressure to murder not only her unborn child, but also her shot

at a normal happy life. The novel ends on a tragic note by the conventional sense with the death of Henchard, but by making Elizabeth strong enough to live her life for her own sake, deeming herself deserving of happiness irrespective of the men around her, Hardy sends an important message to the audience of that time, that women had the right to love, and the right to happiness. Hardy shows how the death of Henchard is the death of the stubborn Patriarchal hegemony that refuses to allow women breathing space. I would like to conclude by quoting Elizabeth Cady Stanton who in the Declaration of sentiments at the Seneca Falls Convention wrote,

"...the history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her... He has compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she has no voice...He has made her, if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead"

Stanton too mirrors Hardy's sentiment of a total denouncement of the Patriarchal Hegemony. Through the characters of Susan, Lucetta and Elizabeth-Jane, this research paper attempts to depict how Hardy's characterization of these women embodies his call for a liberal society where women irrespective of their characters and labels given to them by the society, have the right to love, the right to live, and the right to happiness.

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