

Linking Women through the Ages: From Hardy to Hosseini

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Abstract:

Women have been portrayed in various portraits from mother, sister and daughter to wife, from the Aeschylean times to the modern era. However, they have been subjected to repression throughout the ages. They have been sexually constrained, inhibited and silently subjugated against their own will. In the Victorian age, the scenario became something different. The men tried to establish their masculinity in every possible sphere, but at the same time gradually yielded to feminine standards. Thus a change came in the concept of women and their position was endeavoured. In fiction, this strain got its first prominence in Hardy's novels where he gave his women characters an image of modernity.

This paper shall try to view the formation of some emancipated women in the novels of Hardy and Hosseini who carved a niche for themselves like Clytemnestra and Helen did in their contemporary times. It will also try to present Hardy as a modern novelist who has not followed the path of his contemporaries and created an identity of his own.

Keywords: women, repression, Hardy, emancipated.

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“One could not count the moons that shimmer on her roofs,
Or the thousand splendid suns that hide behind her walls.”

-Tabrizi.

(translated by Josephine Davis)

Women have been presented in various portraits from mother, sister and daughter to wife, from the Aeschylean times to the modern era. However, they have been subjected to repression throughout the ages. They have been sexually constrained, inhibited and silently subjugated against their own will. In the Victorian age, the scenario became something different. The men tried to establish their masculinity in every possible sphere, but at the same time gradually yielded to feminine standards. Thus a change came in the concept of women and their position was endeavoured. In fiction, this strain got its first prominence in Hardy's novels where he gave his women characters an image of modernity. This paper shall try to view the formation of some emancipated women in the novels of Hardy and Hosseini who carved a niche for themselves like Clytemnestra and Helen did in their contemporary times.

The novels of Hardy have an atmosphere of brooding melancholy about them. This gives an impression that life is a punishment inflicted by an indiscriminating hand. To discover the main reason behind such a tragic vision of life, one has to trace back to Hardy's life. Hardy was a man born after his time – the last lonely representative of an ancient race, strayed by some accident of Destiny into the alien world of nineteenth century. His childhood made him

responsive to the basic joys and sorrows of mankind, to the love of home and to the horrors of death and the terrors of superstition. According to Kreisel:

We can even trace some of the great philosophical themes of his work back to his schoolboy days and the intimate daily contact he had with the Dorset countryside: the slow and inexorable transformations in him wrought by social evolution and geological change; the effect of natural laws and environments on individuals and communities. (Kastan 502).

In Hardy's novels, the unhappy co-incidences sealed the fate of his tragic victims which was evidently the work of Hardy and it became clear that the plot had been devised by the author himself. This proved to some extent that it was his philosophy to indulge in misery. What is often called his philosophy can be summed up by one of his earliest notebook entries in 1865: "The world does not despise us; it only neglects us." (Rollyson 2076). Critics in all aspects have marked him as a 'pessimist', but they also acknowledge that Hardy was a great existential humanist. His hope for humanity was that people would realise that creeds and conventions presupposed are baseless. He hoped that human would loosen themselves from foolish hopes and become aware of their freedom to create their own value.

In the early Victorian era, women was practically denied any power to rule over her family but was expected to be totally responsible for its physical and moral being. The position of women was threatened and therefore the reassertion of her position became necessary. When the reassessment of woman's position took place in the later Victorian period, there followed a new study of women leading to a new concept. The traditional images were redefined and the age old theories that women should be passively dependent and divinely chaste, a model of self renunciation arose. Women began to be portrayed in Victorian novels as intelligent and capable beings, responsible for their own lives and actions, thinking in a definite manner of carrying out their own situations. Eminent personalities like John Stuart Mill, John Ruskin advocated theories elevating women to a glorified status. Though Hardy's novels are tragic, he gave a much elevated treatment to the women characters in his novels reflecting the changing concept of womanhood in its socio-economic aspect in all levels of the society in the later Victorian age, became a fore runner of his age and he vehemently protested against the 'Fallen woman' (Cunningham 96) notion and fought for the 'New Woman'. (Cunningham 82).

Hardy's characters, both men and women apparently are puppets in the hand of Hardy himself. According to Patricia Stubbs:

Hardy shows how women's lives were distorted simply because they were woman, trapped in a moral order rooted in sexual discrimination and in a social structure which refused to acknowledge them as human

beings. Women are almost always at the centre of Hardy's uncompromising tragic vision, and not merely of the universe, as is so often claimed, but of men and women in society. (Stubbs 80).

Hardy's heroines fall into three basic types – devoted, patient and forgiving women like Tess or Susan; wilful, capricious but good like Bathsheba, Fancy and others; and romantic and passion led women like Lucetta, Eustacia and others. Hardy's female characters have all the patience and courage to face misfortunes. Their misfortunes are mainly centred round their love life. John Cunningham rightly said that:

The fact that Hardy's women are characteristically capricious, fickle and often childishly emotional seems to place them firmly on the side of convention; the advantage they hold over their suitors in terms of brains, wealth and physical skills inclines them in the opposite direction. (Cunningham 84).

They may be indiscreet at times, but are 'pure' women and in some cases 'are more sinned against than sinning.' All Hardy's tragic heroines are the variations of the same woman: the essentially feminine whose whole personality is centred upon the passionate desire to fulfil herself in self-giving love and she is a predestined victim of a man unworthy of her. Hardy seems not to be concerned about any differentiation of one woman from another; he is content to treat again and again the same tragic theme, varying only the situation and more superficial details. He makes his characters suffer and suffer. For them happiness is an interlude in the general drama of pain. He seems to find happiness in midst of pain. The contradictions in his

scheme produces some of the strengths as well as some of the weaknesses, both of his fiction and of his feminism. His women characters display some aspects of the emancipated women as Hardy instills modernity in them and portrays them differently.

Hardy has shown his women characters as embodiments of contradictory nature, and amongst them Sue Bridehead of *Jude the Obscure* is an exemplary figure. She is an intellectual woman. She is the one who escaped the narrator's sympathetic prediction of a blighted life, her romantic rebelliousness sets motion a different course of tragic events. She averts marriage but Hardy is bent to make her life miserable. Hardy gives ample scope to Sue to breed herself different, but at the same time cripples her himself. His handling of marriage is cynical and the marriage relationship in this novel won him unpopularity and notoriety. Jude's marriage to Arabella had a temporary basis in mutual desire: but Sue's marriage to Phillotson is a disaster. Sue told Jude that she did not regard marriage as a sacrament:

As our going on together ... the people round us would have made it unable to continue. Their views of the relations of man and woman are limited.... The philosophy only recognizes relations bases on animal

desire. The wide field of strong attachment where desire plays, at least, only a secondary part, is ignored by them. (*Jude the Obscure* 201).

This is also traced to an autobiographical incident as it is known that his married life with Emma Gifford was not a happy one. He was attracted to one of his cousins, as Jude was to Sue. Sue becomes terrorized sexually and it is seen in a critical light. Sue becomes an interesting character when she struggles against spiritual values in the ecclesiastical life at Oxford and her rebellion against the physical expectations of sexually conventional men. She is devastatingly critical of moral and religious orthodoxy, yet at the same time she is emotionally bound by it. Her children's death overwhelms her and she superstitiously re-embraces the moral dogma she apparently repudiated. When she breaks and collapses at the end of the novel, she falls into an extreme piestic spiritual self abashment before God and also to her husband makes her character a contrasting one.

Bathsheba Everdene of *Far From the Madding Crowd* is a typical pastoral coquette who in the starting of the novel makes an ostensible shift when she inherits the a farm of her own. Her relations with Gabriel Oak and Boldwood has been criticised but she creates an identity for herself. Many critics asserts that Bathsheba's running away to seclude herself in the wood is her reconciliation, but the view is wholly untenable because in this manner she shows her undomitable spirit. She is a highly emancipated woman and an exception to Hardy's women as she demands equal status with the men when she goes to the market.

Tess of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* at the beginning of the novel is a true child of nature who is confident that the natural world will provide her the bliss of life, will protect her and sustain her. However, her dreams get shattered when she is seduced by her employer's son. When nature

fails her, her confidence stumbles and she begins a journey both inward and outward in search of stable orientation and a reintegration into a relationship with the natural world. The real tragedy of Tess is her insistent hope to find the meaning of her which unfortunately she comes across after rebelling against Alec and killing him. She is like John Bunyan's pilgrim, Christian who sees herself as being on a pilgrimage throughout her life. Hardy's own self is reflected in the character of Tess. The pessimism of Hardy is prevalent in Tess which is seen during her conversation with her brother about the choice of apples:

"Did u say the stars were worlds, Tess?"

"Yes."

“All like ours?”

“I don’t know, but I think so. They sometimes seem to be like the apples on our stubborn-tree. Most of them seem splendid and sound—a few blighted.

“Which do we live on—a splendid one or a blighted one?”

“A blighted one.”

(Tess of the D’Urbervilles 42)

He creates Tess as a self effacing character, but also destroys her chances of prospering in life. Hardy’s handling of tragic motifs is not merely a literary exercise but he is conscious of the ending of Tess before the readers. He uses the image of gallows much earlier in the novel which eventually becomes true in Tess’ life as she was hanged at the end of the novel. The passage is as follows: The dairyman turned to her with his mouth full, his eyes charged with serious inquiry, and his great knife and fork planted on the table, like the beginning of the gallows. (Tess of the D’Urbervilles 136). Also the last line proves it more better: “Justice” was done, and the President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess. And the d’Urberville knights and dames slept on in their tombs unknowing. (Tess of the D’Urbervilles 419). In this way she is perhaps one of the best heroines of Hardy.

Eustacia Vye of *The Return of the Native* is a proud, spirited girl and ambitious in her own way. She is a queen in the novel. She is one of the romantic heroines of Hardy and one of the anti-thetical characters. The most concrete image is of her wandering on the Heath, carrying an hourglass in her hand hoping for escape is similar to that of Tess. She despises the heath, but is trapped within it like a poor bird. She wants to escape the boredom of her life. She is an escapist, impractical and finally destructive. She shows her rebellion by indulging in extramarital relations and according to critics; she bears “the light of Promethean rebellion.” (Butler 42). In Eustacia, Hardy infuses a revolting spirit. She may blend into the heath, but she does not care for it as it would not be productive. Hardy designed the character of Eustacia in such a manner that one has to agree with Stubbs’ comment that: “The compassion for Eustacia in her dilemma, for

her thwarted, frustrated energy, co-exists with Hardy’s ambivalent attitude towards her rebellion.” (Stubbs 71).

Hardy emphasises on impulsive life and he wanted to preach through his novels, a form of revolt against his times and social conventions. Hardy experiments with the women characters, but never idolises them which is a contrast to his changed views as he seems to agree to some extent to the Victorian ideals. Tess, the pure woman, is by Victorian standards, not so

pure; Bathsheba has the subtle hidden qualities of a flirt in her and Jude defies society openly. In spite of all these, Hardy protests against the notion of 'Fallen Woman' (Cunningham 96) by unequivocally supporting Tess. In *Tess*, when Angel Clare demanded perfect 'freshness', Hardy criticises him by supporting Tess as he did in case of Elfrida. Hardy characterises and adjusts the heroine in order to remove all possibility of irrelevant criticism.

Hardy is even sensitive towards his women characters and explores new social possibilities for them. Through his anti-marriage sentiments, Hardy pulls way towards the 'New Woman' (Cunningham 82) novels though his heroines are put to very different use. Sue is modelled in certain aspects on the 'New Woman' (Cunningham 82): a modern woman who is liberated, forward thinking, and demands full equality with men. Cunningham supports this by saying: "Sue Bridehead combines sexual provocation with frigidity, a characteristic of an apparently honest and fulfilled New Woman who has succeeded in practising what she preached." (Cunningham 96). Eustacia Vye's power is both compelling and dangerous. He also admires Tess for being almost a standard woman in a Victorian age. A similar double bind is confronted in Bathsheba, who exposes her free will and rejects marrying Gabriel Oak in her own ways. Through these woman characters, Hardy shows that it was hard for women in those times to emanate from a state of things more universal.

The ostracisation of women by the society is also echoed in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, when she sees that women were served different quality of food in Fernham. She compares two meals. The first, at a men's college, consists of whitest cream, partridges, thin coin like potatoes and a sugary wave dessert. She, instead was served a very filthy food. According to her:

Here was my soup. ... It was a plain gravy soup. There was nothing to stir fancy in that. One could have seen through the transparent liquid any pattern....The plate was plain. Next came beef with its attendant greens and potatoes ... sprouts curled and yellowed at the edge, and bargaining and cheapening....Prunes and custards followed. (Chaudhuri 118).

Woolf even imagines an imaginary sister of Shakespeare named Judith Shakespeare and exclaimed that she would not get so much freedom as Shakespeare received but searches for a 'New Woman' like Hardy.

The plight of women is not restricted to a certain era or age; it shares a common feature everywhere, and be it in Hardy's time or Hosseini's. The condition of women has not gone a major change in the previous centuries and it can be well linked with the deteriorating condition of women in the third world countries. Hosseini in his novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

examines the relationships between Mariam and Laila, two of the women protagonists – born vastly into different circumstances but find themselves with the same abusive husband. He attempts to explore the inner lives of these two fictional women beneath their veils. Mariam is regularly abused by Rasheed, the husband of both Mariam and Laila, and Mariam exclaimed after one such incident remembered of her mother Nana saying: “As a reminder of how women like us suffer,” she’d said. “How quietly we endure all that falls upon us.” (Hosseini 90). He presents traditional customs regarding women in a relatively balanced fiction, offering the protection it provides.

Hosseini portrays the suffering of women in all its aspects. In his interviews, he exclaimed that women suffered not only through bombings in war-ridden Afghanistan, but also from gender-based abuse. He hopes through his characters to observe a better future for women. In his characters, there is a tinge of sadness for the prevailing condition of women due to the Taliban rule, though Babi, Laila’s father hoped that the war would change the situations. He exclaimed: “Women have always had it hard in this country, Laila, but they’re probably more free now, under the communists, and have more rights have they’ve ever had before.” (Hosseini 133).

Mariam and Laila become figures of ‘New Woman’ when they protested against their husband and when Mariam kills her husband and she becomes parallel to Sue, Bathsheba in some extent.

The protest which Hardy and Hosseini portrays for women gets more support in a poem by a black female slave, Sojourner Truth in 1852 when she questions the identity of women in a Women’s Rights Convention in Ohio and when a man gave a reply that women are too fragile, she responded in her poem *Ain’t I a Woman?* . She replies the world:

... That little man in black there say

a woman can’t have as much rights as a man cause Christ wasn’t a woman...

Where did your Christ come from?

From a God and and a woman!

Man had nothing to do with him.

The views of Hardy marks him as a prophet in his contemporary times but is well linked with Hosseini and transcends him as a modern novelist in terms of feminist discourse. They both are in search of a better condition for woman besides finding the meaning of life. In his novels, Hardy have a searching criticism of modern life and finally of all life. The chorus of ordinary men and women is present but everybody is born in the same milieu but have acquired the self consciousness that is the distinctive characteristic of modern man, who questions the fundamentals of society, the rightness of social conventions, the sanctity of the marriage contract and finally the power and benevolence of the universe. As Nathan A. Scott rightly comments on Hardy: "... not only does he lead us back to that trauma in the nineteenth century out of which the modern existentialist imagination was born, but he also brings us forward to our own time." (Rollyson 2085). Indeed, Hardy merges well with his view of women with Hosseini, who is nearly a recent writer, much after the time of Hardy.

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