

Ecofeminism: Reading Thomas Hardy's Novels *The Mayor of Casterbridge and Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

JUBINAROSA.S.S

PhD Research

Scholar Department of Tribal

Studies School for the Study of C

ulture

Central University of Jharkhand, India Mob: 82

81852197

Abstract: An ecofeminist reading of Hardy's major tragic fictions will certainly reveal his concern regarding the division between rural and urban life styles, the unfair Victorian society's sexual norms and the devastation that germinates from patriarchal society's subjective rules of conduct. Hardy's fiction depicts the direct results of male dominated society's biased, illogical or condemnatory social norms. Various types of spiritual and religious traditions and ecofeminist perspectives mingle to form a wide web of relationship between human and nature. Deep ecology, issues of racism and academic disciplines based on aboriginal culture continue to be replaced and restructured by this tangled network of ecology. The observation and hypothesis of an ecofeminist reading of the novels *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* by great Victorian novelist from English literature, Thomas Hardy trace the evolution of woman and her replica in the form of various elements, feeling and experiences in nature using literature as a basic text. The concept of 'the Green' can be considered eternal as well as maternal.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Green Studies, Oppression, Deep Ecology, Patriarchy

The Mayor of Casterbridge appears to require a feminist reading at first because within the first pages of the novel, Michael Henchard, a man who eventually becomes the mayor of the "Casterbridge" drunkenly sells his wife and child to another man named Newson. By this

action, he commits one of the most atrocious acts of female mistreatment and oppression at the hands of a man found in literature. Hardy's presentation of the bargaining scene is notable:

'Five Shillings', Said someone, at which there was a laugh. 'No insults', Said the husband. 'Who'll say a guinea?... Set it higher, auctioneer', Said the trusser. 'Two guineas!' said the auctioneer; and no one replied. 'If they don't take her for that, in ten seconds, they will have to give more', said the husband. 'Very well. Now, auctioneer and another. 'Three guineas-going for three guineas!' said the heavy man... 'Four guineas!' Cried the auctioneer. 'I will tell ye what- I won't sell her for less than five', said the husband, bringing down his fist so that the base ins danced. 'I'll sell her for five guineas to any man that will pay me money... Susan, you agree? She bowed her head with absolute indifference. 'Five guineas.' Said the auctioneer...

(The Mayor of Casterbridge 19)

By treating his wife and daughter as pieces of his personal property available for sale at his discretion, Henchard absolutely objectifies them, forcing these two females into an unfamiliar, potentially deadly situation. He didn't give any kind of humanitarian consideration to them. Here, the fact is that another man actually purchases these two humans. Susan, being a woman has no other option and she just obeys him. She has no other better solution at the time of her sale than to accept the plight of victimisation and operation by patriarchal society, revealing the level to which androgenic dominance has permeated the society. The oppression of women by individuals representing the dominant factions of patriarchal society and women's subjugation as a result of the collective minds and normative beliefs, characteristic of such an unbalanced social setting, continue throughout the novel. A neo-feminist reading of this text will identify many ways in which the mistreatment suffered by characters belonging to non-dominant social

groups is accompanied by significant damage to the natural world. All of these incidents represent injuries caused by patriarchal civilization either in the form of specific acts committed by humans or as general effects of male dominated society's unfair nature and commerce progressing into a system that values individual profit above all. Michael Henchard, a hay-trusser comes to the village of Weydon Priors where, in a drunken state, he sells his wife, Susan and daughter Elizabeth Jane to a sailor Newson for five guineas. When he returns to his senses, he takes a solemn vow not to touch intoxicants for twenty years. Eventually he becomes rich and rises to become the mayor of "Casterbridge" (Dorchester). After eighteen years his wife returns; Newson then supposed to be dead. She unites to her husband along with her daughter Elizabeth, who is in fact the daughter of Newson, his daughter being already dead. Trouble soon comes; Susan, his wife dies and Henchard learns the truth about the girl. Gradually Farfrae becomes Henchard's potent rival in business and also in love and marries Lucetta who had formerly been in love with Henchard. The story of the sale of his wife is revealed, Henchard loses Mayorship and he is ruined in business, and he takes to drink again. His step-daughter is now his only solace, but Newson returns and claims her. Eventually Henchard becomes alone. In the meantime Lucetta has married Farfrae, but her love-affair with Henchard becomes public and when the scandal mongers arrange a skimming-ride, she falls into a fit of hysteria and dies. Farfrae and Elizabeth agree to marry with Newson's consent. Henchard comes to attend the marriage but he is shabbily treated by Elizabeth. With broken heart he returns and dies after some time. This is very thread of the novel. It can be seen that Michael Henchard has risen to a successful corn merchant and local governing figure when Susan and her daughter, Elizabeth Jane, returns to his life after an absence of many years following their sale. Henchard's political assignment and his position in agricultural commerce are ones of little productivity. Instead

,this publically revered man hold a professional position dependent upon the exploitation of
thelowerclassesoffarmersandlabourersandthedestructionofnaturethroughagriculture.

Followers of green studies and ecofeminists frequently blame at large-scale agricultural operations, driven by capitalists' greed and low-cost labour, for causing significant damage to nature through practices such as the use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides. In addition to agricultural methods contributing to pollution of the natural environment with chemicals and pollution like soil erosion may have happened because of the overwatering. Moreover, cultivating crops that are not a part of the plant life normally found in an area's natural environment frequently depletes certain minerals from the soil and leads to uncontrolled growth of plants or animals that cause the extinction of native species. Vast number of problems created by the commercial agriculture would have been apparent to those living beings during and shortly after the industrial revolution had been essentially balanced for as long as humans could remember. The impact upon nature was accompanied by equally radical economic changes, such as the reduction of trade among individuals due to an increase in centralized, large-scale trading reliant upon mechanization and elevated levels of agricultural production. From then on, it can be traced out:

You must make allowances for the accidents of a large business', he said. 'You must bear in mind that the weather just at the harvest of that corn was worse than we have known it for years. However, I have mended my arrangements on account of it. Since I have found my business too large to be looked after by myself alone, I have advertised for a thorough good man as manager of the corn department. When I've got him you will find these mistakes will no longer occur - matters will be better looked into.

(The Mayor of Casterbridge 49)

Many previously employed rural women, including the essentially self-employed woman who took in sewing, made lace for women's gloves or such job to earn small income

for themselves and their families had lost the opportunity to trade their labour for needed goods or earn money using their own abilities and skills. These women either had to sacrifice their gainful employment or change their life styles even more drastically by seeking jobs in the cities. Women were finding the Victorian Industrial society of employment to be an unwelcoming, inequitable place ruled by men. Hardy recognized the difficulties of working class women in particular faced in many aspects of their lives, and his frank portrayal of their collective clash against patriarchal oppression, a recurrent theme in the author's fiction, is unparalleled for the time period:

Women work outside the home in both conventional and unconventional occupations, from teaching to negotiating the price of corn, from serving as barmaids to inaugurating telegraphic systems, from working as milkmaids to organizing public readings... In other words, they struggle to shape their own lives with a vigour and energy and resilience that is, to the reader, the more remarkable for the fact that theirs is a struggle against all odds...

(10 Morgan)

Hardy's women are much more modern and free-thinking than any other female characters created by his contemporaries because Hardy's women characters are humanly flawed, something defeated and then are always unwilling to fully submit to the commands of patriarchal dominance. While the difficulties Hardy's female characters are strong-minded and influential as well as tragic. Ecofeminist perspectives address the challenges and oppression of these women characters and it analyzes their battle for autonomy and selfhood. Hardy's fiction may also advance the fight for nature's freedom from human destruction, particularly those injuries which suffer by the nature as a result of an unbalanced patriarchal social structure. One of the most significant examples of nature's destruction at the hands of male dominated society

comes in the last part of the novel. That is the Henchard attempts to give a caged goldfinch to the woman he believes to be his daughter, Elizabeth Jane as a wedding present:

What should that present be? He walked up and down the street, regarding dubiously the display in the shop windows, from a gloomy sense that what he might most likely give her would be beyond his miserable pocket. At length a caged goldfinch met his eye. The cage was a plain and small one, the shop humble, and on inquiry he concluded he could afford the modest sum asked. As he took the newspaper and tied round the little creature's wire prison, and with the wrapped cage in his hand Henchard sought a lodging for the night.

(The Mayor of Casterbridge 382)

Here Henchard goes to the market to buy a wedding present for his step-daughter Elizabeth Jane. Henchard develops by his own feelings of guilt and rejection that he simply forgets the helpless animal in the bushes where he has hidden it outside of Elizabeth Jane's home, while attending to his own desire for acceptance. Henchard has purchased the bird, imprisoned in order to delight humans with its appearances and songs, and the destruction of nature for human pleasure is completed when the bird dies in the cage inches from the natural world that would have given it life had man not intervened.

Once again, a human's selfish action, sanctioned by male dominated society, results in the destruction of a part of nature never meant to be caged, purchased, given as a gift or forgotten and left to starve to death in a metal cell. All these instances happened because of the society, characterized by patriarchal domination, achieved their goals through oppressing both woman and nature.

By close inspection of a selected passage it is possible to appreciate just how rich and evocative Hardy can be in his writing, both from the immediate impact of the passage itself from its general reference outwards to the rest of the novel. The following narration offers a good example of fine descriptive writing together with many suggestive allusions to the main themes in the novel. That is the theme of simpler rural life of Casterbridge:

The lane and its surrounding thicket of thatched cottages stretched out like a spit into the moist and misty lowland. Much that was sad, much that was low, something that were baneful, could be seen in Mixen Lane. Vice ran freely in and out of certain doors of the neighbourhood; recklessness dwelt under the roof with the crooked chimney: shame in some bow-windows: theft (in times of privation) in the thatched and mud-walled houses by the gallows. Even slaughter had not been altogether unknown here. In a block of cottages up an alley there might have been reared an altar to disease in years gone by. Such was Mixen Lane in the times when Henchard and Farfrae were Mayors.

(Mayor of Casterbridge 198)

The word 'Casterbridge' in his title signals further departure from his usual fictional practice. He is very much a rural novelist dealing in open terrain: heath, hills, farmland, woodland. His characters move and work in a natural setting that provides not merely a background but an explanatory perspective. 'Casterbridge' is the fictional town created by Hardy to present the landscape, nature and the very atmosphere of Dorchester. It is evident in the following passage:

Yet this mildewed leaf in the sturdy and flourishing Casterbridge plant lay close to the open country; not a hundred yards from a row of noble elms and commanding a view across the moor of fairy uplands and corn-fields, and

mansions of the great. A brook divided the moor from the tenements and to outward view there was no way across it- no ways to the houses but round about by the road. But under every house-holder's stair there was kept a mysterious plank nine inches wide; which plank was a secret bridge.

(Mayor of Casterbridge 199)

The Mayor of Casterbridge, can be considered as the only novel by Hardy to be located almost solely in a town. Nor is the setting merely nominal: he goes to great lengths to bring to imaginative life the streets, avenues, houses, shops, and bridges of his thinly fictionalized Dorchester, the place where he had grown up and in which he had again taken up residence shortly before beginning the novel. From the very outset of the play it can be seen that the landscape of the rural England is charging:

The scene for that matter being one that might have been matched at almost any spot in any county in England at this time of the year; a road neither straight nor crooked level nor hilly, bordered by hedges, trees and other vegetations, which had entered the black ended-green stage of colour that the doomed leaves pass through on their way to dingy, and yellow and red. The grassy margin of the bank, and the nearest hedge row boughs, were powdered by the dust that had been stirred over them by hasty vehicles...

(Mayor of Casterbridge., 2)

Hardy does find ways of moderating the urban emphasis: "Casterbridge had no suburbs: Country and town met at a mathematical line." (p.20) It can therefore come about that bees and butterflies drift along the High Street, and that the bleating of sheep can be heard from the courthouse. The shops are full of agricultural implements. In the busy market, cattle and farm

produced and labourers are hired. From Hardy's portrayal of the town, Casterbridge, it can be analyzed that the counties of England are progressing to a modern land: "The mass became gradually deserted by the vision into towers, gables, chimneys and casements, the highest glazing shining bleared and bloodshot with the coppery fire they caught from the belt of sunlit cloud in the west." (p.21)

Stability of the people who live in Casterbridge is completely dependent on commerce. Henchard is buying human companionship just as he sold companionship at the auction. His final rejection of aggressive competition is the ultimate theme, but now nowhere else in Hardy's novels is there such a commercial atmosphere, so much emphasis on buying and selling. The marketplace is the centre of Casterbridge, time and again the reader observes the bargaining at all levels. Pounds, pence, cheque books, overdrafts, creditors, bankruptcy, wages, employers and employees are all significant. From barns full of corn to shop windows full of implements and work clothing the basis of commercial bustle is emphasized. The theme expands to include the overwhelming importance of the weather to the economy, introducing age-old belief in superstitions as a means to commercial success. However, such beliefs belong to the past, sought out self-looking and the clash between the old and the new adds another dimension to the novel. It is also a clash between generations, young and old, between

the practices which promise more efficiency and profit, introduced from outside the community, and established patterns. Time honoured methods of cultivation will be challenged by machines. Even the entertainment of Weydon Priors Fair becomes mechanical. Science can improve the cultivation of wheat which once had to be abandoned. Literacy and Chemistry are necessary for a successful corn-factor; steel-yard and scale will supersede guesswork and rule of thumb. Business is becoming a matter of accurate bookkeeping and forward planning. The old, traditional method of cultivation disappeared.

These injurious social practices represent aspects of Hardy's life himself. The most distinctive methods by which Hardy crafts his tragic fiction often involve narration concentrating upon the portrayal of the destruction of nature and the oppression of women by a male-dominated society and its inflexible, more over tyrannical moral codes. Due to the thematic prevalence of these kinds of events in the author's writing, Hardy's novels such as *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Tess of d'Urbervilles* lend themselves to an ecofeminist reading. These novels illustrate perspectives in Hardy's work applicable to both contemporary green studies and a variety of feminist concerns, making his fiction the perfect point for the practice of ecofeminism. In addition to this point, Hardy's depiction of the locale, Wessex villages are not exactly indigenous, pre-urbanized communities, but they are the nearest thing to a culture of habitat which can be found in late nineteenth century England. Cultivation seems to be a part of urbanization and mechanization which results in the invasion with technological ly highlighted social perspectives:

Hardy's plots often turn on the disruptive arrival in such places of forces from outside. New technologies arrive: the seed-drill in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, the steam-driven threshing machine in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. People arrive or return bringing innovations: Clym, Farfrae, Grace, Fitzpiers, Alec d'Urberville, Angel Clare.

(*The Green Studies* 271)

Hardy's moderate treatment of patriarchal society and its conventions as unnecessarily injurious to human life and nature, though subtle to the point of ambiguity at times, is consistent and driven by his obvious concern for the plight of nature and the lives of those individual humans who fall victim to patriarchy's mistreatment. The author's concern for the natural world is made apparent by his naturalist writing style and his highly involved contributions to the

various animal rights groups. At the same time, Hardy addresses the social status of women via his ground-

breaking characterization of strong women engaged in indirect conflict with a male dominated society not yet able to accept their presence. The difficulties or struggles these women experience in their endeavours to overcome patriarchal oppression actually create much of the conflict and actions that drive the plots of Hardy's tragic novels. In light of the time during which it was written, the social criticism present in Hardy's novels represents an accurate and complete portrayal of the many lunatic acts of a male dominated society. Eventually, these novels also serve the vital purpose of fascinating ecofeminist literary criticism that may be supported textually without any significant adjustments being made to the author's intended context for his novels.

Hardy's portrayal of nature highlights his extraordinary level of respect for nature and it reveals an unusually high level of significance being assigned to the natural world in Hardy's mind. Most of the fiction writers of Hardy's time wrote about nature. They kept nature as a setting, the mere background in which human beings' lives take place. Such an attitude creates for nature an undeniably objectifying state of being, particularly when analyzed with commonly accepted ecofeminist theory in mind. In contrast, Hardy's approach elevates the level of nature's importance in his novels to a position very nearly equal to that of his human characters, a fact that positively links Hardy's perspective to contemporary ecofeminist goals and theory.

Thomas Hardy spent much of his lifetime for writing about both his experiences as an individual and those of an entire culture and his tragic novels manage to remain deeply personal representations of the lives of individual characters while also seeming to embody the desperate pangs of all English citizens as they collectively struggled futilely against the disordered flow of revolutionary change. As Katherine Porter identifies the conflicted beings of many Victorians in her essay entitled "Notes on a Criticism of Thomas Hardy":

Hardy's characters are full of moral conflicts and of decisions arrived at by mental processes certainly. Jude, Gabriel, Oak, Clem Yeobright, above all, Michael Henchard, are men who have decision to make, and if they do not make them entirely on the plane of reason, it is because Hardy was interested most in that hairline dividing the rational from the instinctive, the opposition, we might call it, between instinct and the habit of thought fixed upon the individual by his education and his environment. Such characters of his as are led by their emotions lead to disaster. Romantic miscalculation of the possibilities of life, of love, of the situation; of refusing to reason their way out of their predicament; these are the causes of disaster in Hardy's novels. (399)

A large part of Victorian literature not only offers its readers the opportunity to gain great historical insight, but it also exposes ongoing social issues relevant to contemporary thinking while contextually narrating humanity's attempt to solve these problems. Such a wide view of collective themes, goals, and potential for tangible, positive social outcomes of the study of Victorian literature fit exceptionally well with the basic theories of ecofeminism and the diverse body of literary criticism that has formed from ecofeminist cultural studies.

In the novel *Tess of d'Urbervilles* unfairness dominates the lives of Tess and her family to such an extent that it begins to seem like a general aspect of human existence. Tess does not mean to kill Prince, but she is punished anyway, just as she is unfairly punished for her rape by Alec. Christianity teaches that there is compensation in the after life for unhappiness suffered in this life, but the only devout Christian encountered in the novel may be the revered, Mr. Clare. Generally, the moral atmosphere of the novel is not Christian justice at all, but Pagan injustice. The pre-Christian rituals practiced by the farm workers at the opening of the novel and Tess' final rest at Stonehenge at the end, remind of a world where the gods are not just

and fair, but whimsical and uncaring. In addition, religious morality's role in supporting practical dominance is point of particular interest to the ecofeminist critic's approach:

Among... gendered pairings, that of Christianity and paganism necessitates further comment here to inform my analysis in subsequent chapters. This dyad stems, to some extent from the perceived biblical justification for the marginalization of women that is both applauded and challenged in the fiction. In effect, Christianity becomes a marker of a character's participation in patriarchy, whereas paganism becomes a sign of one's otherness to it.

(Patrick Murphy)

Hardy's novels can be considered as social novels. Naturally, they deal with such social problems as marriage, sex, motherhood, love, chastity etc. All miseries in life issue from certain maladjustments in social life, in which maladjustment in marriage plays a vital role. Mickelson's observations are case in point in this context:

Monogamous marriage in a capitalistic society depends upon the inferior status of women. In Engels' words, monogamous marriage declares that the man will be supreme in the family;

His wealth be concentrated solely in his hands, and only his children inherit the wealth. This necessitates monogamy on the woman's part, but not on the man's. Engels concludes that monogamous marriage is the "first subjugation of one sex by the other" and marks "the first class oppression of the female by the male sex."

(Mickelson 86)

His two great novels such as *Tess of d'Urbervilles* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* deals in detail with the problem of marriage. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* Henchard feels that by

marrying Susan he has committed a great mistake. For this reason he offers his wife for sale. Greedy capitalism so often inspires in humans, here in Henchard. In this view, marriage becomes a means of increasing profits for the dominant portions of patriarchal society at the expense of female agency. Thus both novels are poignantly portrayed the issues facing women in nature in the Victorian society.

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