

Conclusion

Women were given dominant roles in Hardy's novels, and Hardy could successfully show them in their predicament, resistance and intervention against the backdrops of an orthodox Victorian society. In his novels Hardy voiced his deep anger and dissatisfaction against the social, moral, psychological, economic and legal codes that were highly discriminatory. As against their traditional role, women were shown engaged in struggle against the sexist society to articulate their own feelings, hopes and aspirations. Hardy found to his dismay that the male world rigorously suppressed the efforts of women to define themselves as individual in the society. Hardy believed that prolonged subordination of women was the cause of the distortion of their nature. Women characters in his novels were trapped by the double standard of the society. Their fate, as it were, was predetermined by the very fact of their being women. In the Victorian society relation between the sexes were governed by a fundamental principle of subordination. The society with its double-standard punished any woman who breached social codes but it exonerated men from their grievous offences. Women within their circumscribed world were not allowed to share power and dignity with their male counterparts. They were hardly aware of the potentialities in them. The scopes for employment of women in the society were very limited. Only two ways were open to them - to take to the role of a submissive wife or to choose most insignificant job of a field labour or a worker. Hardy noted that the rigid notion about the role and position of women in the society was responsible for the retarded development of the suffragist movement. He believed that real freedom of women was possible only when the unjust patriarchal society could be overthrown and women were granted social, economic and biological equality. To do this he thought that artistic inspiration was necessary to demolish the foundation of the patriarchal society. Hardy along with other major novelists of the period, e.g., Meredith and Gissing advocated the emancipation of women from their stereotypical roles in the society.

As Carl Pearson and Catherine Pope have it, 'Women characters in the contemporary society were caught in double-bind. If they did not conform to the conventional notion of the society they were termed "imperfect" woman' (Pope and Pearson: 1981, 24). Hardy with his preference for "imperfect woman", presented women characters in his novels with their human weaknesses. They did fail to satisfy the conventional standards of femininity. Breaking away from the stereotypical image they experienced a new sensation of pleasure in their physical and sexual selves' (Pope, and Pearson :1981,14). Hardy noted that the politics of representation of women in literature and art perpetuated the exploitation of women in the society. He was concerned about denial of sexual reality to women. He challenged the sexual ideology of his time by representing women characters whose unconventional behaviour shook the foundation of the society. His women characters with their vibrant sexuality, strong headedness, and unconventional role found themselves the objects of hostility and bitter criticism from groups of critics who feared that these subversive women posed a threat to the conventional society.

For presenting the so-called "less than perfect womanhood" (Morgan, 1988) even a charge of misogyny was brought against him. But Hardy remained committed to his conviction about the "woman question". As Shanta Dutta observes: "Hardy's fictional women had drawn most of the critical attention and ire, and Hardy had to keep insisting that 'no satire on sex is intended in any case by the imperfection of my heroines' (1874) and nearly two decades later he had still to lament that many of his novels had suffered so much from misrepresentation' as being attacks on womankind' (1891)(Dutta:2000,204). However, Hardy was bold enough to present subversive women who did not conform to Victorian ideals. They challenged the monopoly of the male dominated society.

Cytherea, Elfride, Bathsheba, Ethelberta, Eustacia, Tess et al struggle to find womanly fulfillment in the male world. Cytherea and Elfride, Hardy's earlier heroines moved away from their conventional images and questioned the identity and position accorded to women in the patriarchal society.

Bathsheba one of 'Hardy's most sexually passionate heroines' (Morgan,1988) challenged the monopoly of the male-dominated corn-market and assumed the role of a farm manager. Bathsheba with her explicit sexuality demanded equal response from male sexuality. However, Bathsheba's eroticism went unnoticed by the contemporary critics. Rather they criticised Hardy bitterly for incorporating the scene of the dead Fanny with her still-born child. Ethelberta, Hardy's eponymous heroine of the book had recourse to subterfuges and stratagems to get recognition in the male dominated literary world. By the standard of conventional femininity Ethelberta failed to attain the ideal womanly position as she took to the so-called masculine role of a story-teller and published her verses in a book form. This encroachment of her in the exclusive male bastion forced her to get the stigma of an "improper woman". Eustacia's circumscribed existence in Egdon heath frustrated her womanly aspirations. Hardy articulated the anger and despair of an intelligent, resourceful and beautiful woman .But her free and frank sexuality was misinterpreted by the society.

In an unsigned review in the Saturday Review a reviewer observed this about Eustacia: 'Even the style of Eustacia's beauty is so vaguely and transcendently described that it neither wins our heart nor takes our fancy. For the rest she is a wayward and impulsive woman, essentially commonplace in her feelings and wishes who compromises herself by vulgar indiscretions' (Cox:1970, 54). But Hardy imparted a tragic dignity to her heroic struggle. Victorian ideology dictated that a woman who wanted to fulfill her desires must accept death or compromise. To Eustacia death was preferable to compromise.

Hardy who had never professed to be a feminist may be found to be conscious of the new form of agrarian economy and capitalism that degraded women to the status of a commodity. His presentation of women characters in The Mayor of Casterbridge gives evidence to the implicit support that he extended towards the feminist movement to improve the condition of women. Henchard, who personifies Victorian patriarchal values, ultimately surrenders to eternal female values of love, care and affection. Hardy's women

characters in his later novels are perhaps more radical in their subversion of Victorian values. Hardy showed how social ideology of marriage were extremely oppressive to women. Hardy's sympathy for exploited and marginalized women is evidenced in his portrayal of such characters in his novels. The institution of marriage was a kind of trap for women. Through conventional marriage a woman lost her autonomy and identity. Bathsheba, Eustacia, Ethelberta, Grace, Tess and finally Sue are trapped by the conventional marriage. They failed to come out of the ideology of marriage and were lost in oblivion.

Grace Melbury became a vehicle of her father's upper-class mobility. She was looked upon by her family members as a 'commodity' and not as a human being. Hardy castigates the Divorce Laws that did not allow Grace her cherished freedom from her licentious husband. Marriage in Hardy's novels hardly provided any happiness to man and woman. Hardy narrated the tale of victimisation of an innocent woman by the double-standard of sexual morality of the Victorian society. When Tess and Angel united through marriage the spurious standard of sexual morality came in their way of happy union. Tess became vengeful against the society. She avenged her sexual degradation at the cost of her life. Hardy invited the wrath of conventional critics for presenting a radical woman in Tess. In his Preface to 1891 edition of Tess of the D'urbervilles he claimed that the novel 'is an attack to give artistic form to a true sequence of things ... If an offence comes out of the truth, better is it that the offence comes than the truth be concealed' (Preface to Tess of the D'urbervilles, 1891, VI). Tess did not accept death like the conventional heroines. She faced boldly the executioner after avenging her sexual degradation. Hardy's hostility to the institution of marriage found a culmination in Jude the Obscure. To Hardy a bad marriage was one of the direst things on earth, and one of the cruellest things' (CL, 2:98). Sue questioned the legal marriage and felt that her relationship with Jude pioneered a new relationship which was certainly taking its roots Sue's radical attempt at re-structuring man-woman relationship had failed miserably. The time for it proved to be yet immature.

Hardy's women characters evinced a distinct evolutionary growth. Women in his earlier novels showed their conformation to the rigid ideological demands of the time. It is due to the fact that Hardy as a rising novelist did not yet dare to present subversive women in his novels. At this stage he did not wish to offend the orthodox tastes of the conventional Victorian critics and readers. But Hardy had already in mind the existence of oppression and exploitation of women in the society. Though Hardy's representation of women in his earlier novels were conventional, he however never failed to project the victimisation of women. Hardy's earlier heroines lacked the courage to come in confrontation with the social codes. But in spite of their traditional images, Cytherea, Elfride and Fancy Day did sometimes show the traits of emergent womanhood. The women characters of Hardy's middle career moved a step forward in the direction of advanced womanhood. They were endowed by Hardy with the potentialities of breaking through the bonds which chained them to traditional customs. Eustacia, Ethelberta and Bathsheba fought against the discriminatory social ideologies. The women of Hardy's later novels moved another step towards liberation. They were presented by the author with the potentialities of overthrowing the patriarchy. They were fully conscious of their position as women in the society. As women they had to fight a number of socio-economic inequalities. They became victims of the double-standard of the divorce act, sexual morality and the inequities of the institution of marriage. They questioned motherhood and marriage ideology.

Hardy was not a feminist in the political sense of the term but he indirectly contributed to the issues of 'Women emancipation' by presenting unconventional women in his novels. Although they were defeated by the orthodox morality of the society, it was only for the time being. Their clash with the society did not go in vain. They initiated the process of ending the ills of the patriarchal society.

Hardy criticism at present has undergone a revolutionary change with the advent of post-structuralist, psychoanalytic, feminist and materialist theories. The theories have dismantled the traditional humanist criticism.

Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Helen Cixous among others have been exploited in the recent approaches to Hardy criticism. Lacan's psychoanalytic theories have enabled to focus new light on erotic desire in man and woman while Psycho-linguistic theories of Kristeva and Cixous, have added a new dimension to recent feminist criticism. Critics like Dellamora have explored issues of masculinity in Hardy's novels. This new focus on masculinity has given a new in dimension to gender criticism. Recent development in gender criticism has led to more sophisticated in the treatment of masculinity and femininity. Especially current studies on masculinity have created possibilities for analysis of the issues of lesbianism that demands a serious attention. Peter Widdowson says that 'frequent representation of his [Hardy] fiction on film and television poses serious challenge to Hardy criticism' and the relation between the written text and its visual reproduction has clearly raised issues response and interpretation that would claim further reckoning' (ibid). However it is impossible to predict the future course of Hardy criticism. But it can be easily said that Hardy's work will continue to inspire the future critics and their use of ever inventive critical tools.