

## *Preface and Acknowledgements*

Critics have approached the novels of Thomas Hardy from different perspectives. Over a long period Hardy's novels have been studied from the metaphysical standpoint which suggests a mysterious relationship between man and nature. Some scholars have approached Hardy's novels from a sociological standpoint while others from the Marxist one. Marxist interpretation of Hardy's novel has tried to expose class struggle and exploitative nature of power relationship in the society that they depict. Recently Hardy's novels have received attention from the feminist critics. My approach to Hardy's Novels has been made from the feminist standpoint I think there are still many unexplored aspects in Hardy's handling of the woman question. There are yet enough scope to understand Hardy's women especially in terms of the contemporary documents that appear to give serious thought to the condition of women at that time. The woman question forms an essential part of Victorian thought especially because of the contemporary concern about the role and status of women in society. The code of behaviour imposed on women by the sexual double standard and a neurotic sexual ideology denied female sexuality altogether. This double standard of sexual morality imposed on women severe punishment for slightest deviation from ideal feminine code but which blandly ignored the male offences. This denial of female sexuality was a prominent feature of Victorian society. Moreover religion reinforced the concept of sexual inequality. Marriage and maternity was the natural destiny of a woman. Economic exploitation further aggravated their social condition. Women in Hardy's novels are shown as trapped in the conventions of a patriarchal society. Thomas Hardy challenges the sexual ideology of his time through his female characters whose failure to conform to traditional pattern of behaviour caused social upheaval. In his work the women are imposed upon the penalties of death, madness or mental breakdown for breaking the codes of social behaviour Hardy simultaneously tried to focus on two things. He exposed the contemporary social belief and conventions that enchained women, secondly, he resoned for more freedom for women. Thomas Hardy's

work differed from the mainstream of earlier Victorian fiction to the extent in which to provoke a clash with accepted social conventions. In presenting women who did not conform to conventional role Hardy demolished the so-called proprieties, shaking the foundation of the society. This study also aims to trace the chronological evolution of Hardy's women characters. His female characters are shown to occupy the central place in his novels and they always try to come out of their gendered role. Hardy's representation of women in the early phase of his career as a novelist evinces conventionality in spite of himself. But as Hardy gathers self-confidence he becomes dissatisfied with this conventional ideas, In The Desperate Remedies Cytherea Graye is a thoroughly orthodox creation and she is a stereotype of Victorian woman. Nevertheless, an emancipating drive can yet be observed in her. Similarly in A Pair of Blue Eyes Hardy challenges the sexual ideology of his time through the heroine, Elfride. In her use of sexual power to compensate for the social disadvantages of being a woman and her entanglement in a destructive web of social conventions and prejudices, she anticipates the later heroines. Bathsheba, in Far From the Madding Crowd, resists the 'angel in the house' stereotype. Bathsheba attempts to maintain her independence and prove her talents. But ultimately Bathsheba had to yield to the male protagonist of the novel. Heroines of Hardy's middle career evince a distinct growth of subversive attitude towards patriarchy. Eustacia directly came in clash with social codes. She did not compromise with patriarchal values. She prefers death to compromise. Hardy in his later novels presented women characters radically. The more radical they are the more uncompromising they become to the male world. Hardy showed that to achieve fulfillment a woman must assert herself. Antimarrriage sentiment pulled Hardy somewhat towards the 'New Woman Novel'. In these novels Hardy is a good deal more sympathetic towards women in his treatment of sex and marriage. It was in The Woodlanders, Tess and Jude that he took up these issues. It is in The Woodlanders that Hardy's treatment of the marriage question becomes more explicit in his rejection of the happy ending. The divorce law as it then discriminated against women. In Tess of the D'urbervilles Hardy shows how Tess come in clash with social codes and Tess's life is destroyed simply because she is a woman. This book is a

sustained attack on bourgeois morality making an inflexible demand for purity in woman, but only in woman. In Jude the Obscure Hardy presented with a hard precision some of the new truths which had emerged about the relationship between sexual desire woman liberation and social conventions. Jude the Obscure provides Hardy with an excellent opportunity to air his views on the related question of the social and psychological conditioning of women and their sexual exploitation in marriage. The Women liberation in the nineteenth century encouraged Hardy and other novelists to the feminist debate. They were enthused with political commitment along with creative illumination. Thomas Hardy joined the emancipation movement with both these capacities-artistic and political in this respect, compared to others he stands closer to the moderns.

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