Chapter - V

The Hand of Ethelberta

In Far From Madding Crowd Hardy challenges the traditional concept of femininity and feminine role and he exposes the power-structured relationships that subordinate and exclude women from their right to self assertion. Bathsheba's highly independent personality, explicit sexuality, and efficiency as a farm manager offended the conventional forces of the society. The traditional critics as well as readers grew apprehensive of Hardy's attempt at demolishing the age-old barrier between man and woman on the basis of gender. Bathsheba's representation, therefore, was not received well by the conventional society. Hardy as a budding novelist had no other way than to compromise with the orthodox views about the position of women. But he did not lose sight of the glaring fact of the oppression of women by the patriarchal society. Hardy's campaign against the female subordination and exclusionary principle of the masculine society continues in The Hand of Ethelberta. Ethelberta voices bitter criticism against the patriarchal society. Hardy presents her as radically different from other heroines of his novels. She is endowed with an extraordinary talent for manipulation, using her 'hand' for upper class mobility. Keeping her identity secret, Ethelberta employs subterfuges and stratagems to ensure her place in the literary market. The most talented of Hardy's heroines, she is 'awfully ambitious' with an uncommon ability for suppressing her inner feelings to achieve her objectives, and she is a good hand at 'contrivance'. She is shown to be in total control of her emotions, and her transformation from Berta Chikeral to lady Mountclere is a result of her exploitation of her 'Mephistophelian' endowment of brains (The Hand of Ethelberta, 242, henceforth referred to as HE). Ethelberta, in spite of being a story-teller, poetess, and romancer, could not establish herself as a literary figure in a society uncongenial for women. Ethelberta is represented through the ideologies of self-sacrifice, sense of duty, and abnegation of desires to show that the system of exploitation works well through such idealization of traditional values for women. Hardy has used a comic narrative mode as a guise in this novel to show up exploitation of

women. He connives at the tragic implication of the novel. He believes that, 'all comedy, is tragedy, if you only look deep enough into it' (L, 439). However, this strategy generates a tension in the novel and makes a the tragic undertone inescapable. Leslie Stephen, the editor of The Cornhill Magazine, requested Hardy to write for his magazine a novel similar in theme to the previous novel. Hardy wishing not to be identified as a follower of George Eliot and to escape being type cast as a writer of rural love comedies radically departed in theme and pattern in the new novel. The novel that he contributed to the magazine was titled The Hand of Ethelberta, a Comedy in chapters. Mr. Stephen deleted the subtitle 'a Comedy in chapters' fearing that his readers might take this new novel as a farce. Hardy incorporated into the novel comic elements on the pattern of Comedy of Manners to satirize the upperclass of the London society. Hardy through comedy shows exploitation of a talented poet, a storyteller, who sacrifices her whole life but in return did not get any recognition. He used 'ironic comedy of manners' to expose the condition of the highly ambitious, talented but poor women in the patriarchal society. The exploitative system of the society perpetuates its exploitation of women demanding from them self-sacrifice. Ethelberta, like Tess, sacrifices her whole life for her family. Marrying an old, dissolute aristocrat, Mr. Mountclere, for the economic security of her family, she gradually ended in oblivion. As a novelist, Hardy was committed to highlighting in all his works this oppression of women in the society. He shows that Ethelberta is forced to give up her emotional longings and aspirations and her compromise with the institution of marriage for her social and familial obligations. Lennart A.Bjork pertinently observes this tension at the heart of the novel:

> The novel focuses on Ethelberta, the daughter of a servant, and on her emotional afflictions as she is twice forced to marry out of her class, quenching her spontaneous feelings for the poverty stricken artist Christopher Julian, her first love. In the unfolding of Ethelbrta's fate, the psychological drama grows out of Hardy's tragic vision of the struggle between love and ambition, between the natural feelings of the heart on the one hand and the artificial values of social expediency on the other - unnatural values which Hardy increasingly came to associate with head, with man's intellect(BJork:: 1987,89).

In all his novels Hardy projects women's sufferings due to this social ideological pressure on them. Ethelberta like Cytherea finds that her freedom of choice between, 'the dictates of her understanding and those of her heart' (Desperate Remedies, 232) gradually gets constricted by external forces. Early death of Ethelberta's husband puts her into severe emotional strains and suppression of love for her former lover, Julian Christopher for social expediency. Such emotional awakening in Hardy's earlier heroines is found to have further intensified in the heroines of his later novels.

Hardy represents Ethelberta to air bitter criticism against the masculine world. Ethelberta is shown radically different from other heroines of his novels. Hardy in this novel tries to de-construct the image of 'Woman'. The traditional image of Victorian womanhood demanded of woman passive, powerless and submissive entity. They were hardly assigned any role of a masculine job. But Ethelberta is given the vocation of a story-teller, a romancer, and a skilled manipulator. As Sarah Davies in an article on The Hand of Ethelberta observes:

> In the novel Hardy intentionally sets out to destroy the myth of woman's limited character and sphere of action, as propagated by a substantial amount of nineteenth century fiction, including much of his own work. He constantly draws the reader's attention to the conventional assumptions made in fiction about inherent feminine characteristics and by inverting those very conventions he succeeds in exposing them as fallacious (Davies:1993, 124).

Hardy subverts the notion that women are weak, emotional and irrational beings. Ethelberta with an iron will suppresses her emotions. In this novel Hardy reverses the gender role showing Ethelberta more masculine than her male lover Christopher Julian. The author challenges the Victorian concept of polarised spheres. This polarisation gave rise to the concept of two sphere one for men, and the other for women. Women were assigned the role of a wife whose sphere was limited to hearth and home. Men were assigned the role of a more adventurous job out- side the home. Hardy very tactfully destroys this concept. Ethelberta as a professed story-teller, a breadwinner, and a paternal figure in her family transcends the Victorian concept of

womanhood. She manipulates the situation in such a way that her suitors are controlled by her whims. Hardy has shown her involvement in a multiple role and her potentialities as of subversive traditional womanhood. She like Bathsheba dominates the male world and assuming a fictitious identity breaks the gendered ideology of the society. As Tim Dolin observes, "Ethelberta turns the male cultural heritage to her own advantage, adapting and distorting it at her own convenience and as each event occurs. This cultural opportunism aids her in her constant reinvention and her subversive conformity" (Tim Dolin in introduction to The Hand of Ethelberta 1997 xxxix).

Robert Gittings traces similarities between situations of Hardy's life and Ethelberta's. Concealing his true class origin, Hardy like Ethelberta makes space for himself in the literary society of London. Ethelberta like Hardy temporarily gave up verse for novel writing. Like Hardy she published her first volume of verse 'Metres by E'. Both could not follow their passion for verse for a mere pressing professional job. Hardy through Ethelberta expressed his life-long contempt for class ridden Victorian society. Like Ethelberta, the author was a victim of class prejudice of the upperclass London society. As Robert Gittings observes:

> Like Ethelberta's growing dissociation from his relatives and necessary concealments of his origin as he married middleclass Emma Gifford and because successful with Far From The Madding Crowd and Hardy made a surprising and very personal decision that his next novel would deal with the situation in which he found his own life as a writer by humble origin, acclaimed by a society which might if knowing have found them contemptible (Gittings:1975 289).

The Hand of Ethelberta being a feminist novel questions the values of the patriarchal society. Hardy shows Ethelberta as a widow with a poetic gift and upper class mobility. As a strategy for survival in the discriminatory patriarchal society, she has to have recourse to hypocrisy and subterfuge. As a member of the underprivileged class she perceives that society would never grant her the privileges enjoyed by a male member. She adopts the policy of 'self concealments' as a means of her self-fulfillment. In the struggle for existence, male members of the society are provided with undue advantages,

while the women are denied the rightful ones. Ethelberta conceals her true class origin and creates a space for herself in the upper class society. Hardy justifies her policy of concealment of true identity because he knew that the society would never recognize her talents due to her class origin. The author narrates Ethelberta's meteoric rise in the literary society of London by publishing a collection of verses, entitled 'Metres by Me'. The collection of verses was the talk of the town, especially in the aristocratic society and it was reviewed highly in London Magazine. This critical review attracted attention of some of the so-called aristocrats like Mr. Neigh and Mr. Ladywell. They felt an irresistible attraction towards Ethelberta. At a musical party in Mr. Doncastle's house the talk was Ethelberta's poetic gift. Hardy using 'Comedy of Manners' as his narrative mode satirizes the aristocratic society. A victim of class prejudice, Hardy in all his novels satirizes the follies and foibles, snobbery and superficialities of this society. At the musical party at Mr. Doncastle's house Hardy narrates to give a exposure to Ethelberta's genius. Hardy projects Ethelberta's emotional and intellectual sufferings after the death of her husband, Mr. Petherwin. Her attempt at publication of a collection of verse gets a serious obstruction from her mother-in-law, Lady Petherwin. Lady Petherwin, a conservative aristocratic woman, considers it highly improper on the part of a woman to print her verse. She comes to know about the true authorship of the 'Metres by Me' and exhorted Ethelberta to suppress the so-called 'amatory and gay verses'. She questions Ethelberta's fidelity to the memory of her deceased son. 'You might have left them unwrtten, and shown more fidelity, to him', she admonished her. Hardy shows Ethelberta's self-assertion when she refuses to withdraw her verses from the magazine. Ethelberta openly asserts: "I will not. I don't wish them to be suppressed. I am not ashamed of them, there is a nothing to be ashamed of in them and I shall not take any step in the matter" (HE 60).

Lady Petherwin with her internalized masculine ideology considers it highly improper to get printed the inner feelings of a Ethelberta. A widow, it is unfeminine on the part of Ethelberta to publish amatory verses. Ethelberta was disinherited from her rights on the property of her late husband. Ethelberta's plight shows the fate of average Victorian widows.

Ethelberta, the widow heroine of Hardy, is endowed with a multiple roles. She is a talented poetess, a successful romancer, a skilled manipulator of events, a schemer of marriage and a surrogate mother for her dozen of brothers and sisters. Ethelberta is unique among Hardy's women in the sense that she is apparently in total control of her own destiny. 'Far From passively allowing her hand to be sought in marriage, she deftly plays her 'hand' in the game of social maneuvering' (Shanta Dutta: 2000,23). Deprived of the property of her late husband, Ethelberta brings her family to London. Here she shoulders the responsibilities of a dozen of his brothers and sisters. Being the sole bread-winner of her family, Ethelberta thinks of letting out her house at London and turn it into a Lodge. Ethelberta denies her passion for Christopher and in a letter stresses the importance of her social obligations than the demands of her heart. When Christopher Julian, her lover, asks her if she thought of writing verse again, she replies: "I cannot, that is, I can write no more that satisfies me. To blossom into rhyme on the sparkling pleasures of life you must be under the influence of these pleasures and I am at present quite removed from them surrounded by gaunt realities of a very different description" (HE 72).

Ethelberta with the tender heart of a mother suppresses her own emotional feeling for Christopher and decides to leave him for Picotee. This sacrifice of Ethelberta illuminates the fact of her uncommon ability for suppressing her inner feelings. It is an expression of her power not powerlessness, further evident in the new vocation she chooses for herself. To keep her family members from poverty she plans to take to the vocation of a story teller. She determines to appear before the audience in London. She cannot write poems any more, because she is 'surrounded by gaunt realities' (HE72). Ethelberta wants to take to writing stories rather than verses as she reasons "I felt that to write prose would be an uncongenial occupation, and altogether a poor prospect for a woman like me. Finally I have decided to appear in public" (HE 72). Ethelberta's narrative technique fired the imagination of the public. Some of the weeklies observed this and commented that' a handsome woman, may have her own reasons for causing the flesh of London public to creep upon its bones by her undoubtedly remarkable

narrative power' (HE 87). 'It was in performing this feat that Ethelberta seemed first to discover in herself the full power of that self-command which later on in her career emerged her as her singular possession until at last she was tempted to make of it many fantastic uses, leading to results that affected more households than her own' (HE 84). Ethelberta's novel endeavour did not find any moral support from her relatives. According to her mother Ethelberta's profession is synonymous with sexual fall. As Patricia Ingham observes:

> The narrator informs her mother also speaks in terms of appropriate to a sexual fall when she expresses fear that Ethelberta's story telling activities if combined with the revelation that she is not a lady will take away the family's good name as a simple country folk and interfere with her sisters chances in domestic service' (Ingham:1989, 35).

Faith, Julian's sister, complains of obscenity in Ethelberta's public appearance. She remarks, "Perhaps it is not altogether a severe punishment to her to be looked at by well dressed men. Suppose she feels it as a blessing, instead of an affliction?" (HE 86). Ethelberta's ambiguous position in her family is shown by the author as he points to the fact that instead of recognising her sacrifice for her family, the family members do cruelly criticise her novel attempt. Ethelberta thought of an expedient marriage when her audience at the story-telling sessions became thin. 'A good hand at contrivance' she preferred reason over emotion in this case. As Lennart A. Bjork observes:

> Ethelberta is forced to curb her own passions for the responsibility she feels for her destitute family when, having realised that her own earnings will not suffice to maintain her relatives, she faces the opportunity of relieving their situation by a financially rewarding marriage. Despite her warm affection for Christopher, she forces her relationship with him to acquire gradually "a predominance of judgment over passion" (186) (Bjork: 1987, 90).

The narrative primarily emphasizes on Ethelberta's upper-class transition through a marriage of convenience. Though it is not uncommon in

the Victorian novels. Yet Ethelberta's case is a unique one in the sense that she is endowed with the uncommon ability in choosing her own life partner. The novelist uses under the cover of a comic mode to show Ethelberta's selection of husband of stress Ethelberta's manipulation. As Penny Boumelha observes:

> In much of Hardy's work, issues of class expectations and allegiances and issues of gender determination converge upon the act of apparent erotic freewill that is the choice of a marriage partner. But the essentially comic structure of the romance plot becomes increasingly problematic in the course of his writing. His more mode is closely connected with the extent to which his female protagonist is able to exercise the power of choice and in this he is at one with George Meredith (Boumela in Margaret Higonnet (ed) 1993, 244).

Hardy imparts a Meredithian touch to the novel representing Ethelberta as a more active female protagonist. He subverts the passive female plot of the nineteenth century showing Ethelberta in total control of the plot. Of the three suitors of Ethelberta, Christopher Julian is an impoverished music composer with whom she is in fact, in love. Mr. Neigh and Mr. Ladywell are society men who pursue Ethelberta. Mr. Lord Mountclere, a dissolute old aristocrat, pursues her and she, to save her family from poverty, turns to maneuvering for a useful marriage rather than marriage of love. Hardy reversing gender roles in the novel invests Ethelberta with the privileges of a male in the matter of selection of a husband. Suppressing her inner emotions with iron will, Ethelberta rejects Christopher as a prospective lover Considering the deteriorating financial condition of her family, she reasons: "But somebody in the family must take a practical view of affair or we should all go to the dogs" (HE 102). Sometimes she thought of marrying Mr.Alfred *Neigh, the horse knacker. She was momentarily fascinated by* Mr.Neigh's self-assured statement about her at the British Museum, "Ethelberta is going to marry me" (HE135). But Ethelberta accepts of ' an advantageous marriage,' rejecting romantic love. Penny Boumelha observes:

> What is most unconventional about the marriage plot of Ethelberta Chickerel, though is no the question of whom she will marry: fairy-tale plots in the Cinderella mould

> have accustomed as to such spectacular ascents through the class system. It is, rather the degree of consciousness with which the marriage is brought about that surprises the reader, the point becomes clear if Hardy's protagonist is compared with another comic heroine, Austen's Elizabeth Bennet (Boumelha in Higonnet (ed) 1993, 245).

With a view to assessing the prospect of Mr. Neigh as a husband, Ethelberta along with her sister Picotee undertakes a secret visit to Mr. Neigh's farm at Farnhill. Here she was informed of Mr. Neigh's misogynistic character. However, this trip of Ethelberta ends in disillusionment about Mr. Neigh's profession as a horse knacker. "Ethelberta fancied at that moment that she could not have married Neigh, even had she loved him, so horrid did his belongings appear to be" (H E140).

The author shows Ethelberta's repression of healthy sexuality and emotion in pursuit of her social ambitions and ideas. There lay open to her two directions in which to move. As the narrator informs: "She might annex herself to the easy going high by wedding an old nobleman or she might join to good and all the easy going low by plunging back to the level of her family, giving up all her ambitions for them setting as the wife of a provincial music master named Julian with a little shop of fiddles and flutes" (HE 279-80).

Ethelberta's final decision to choose Lord Mountclere, older than her father, suppressing her tender emotion shows her inhuman capacity for repression of her feelings. She ultimately comes to understand that her marriage with Mountclere is necessary for the benefit of many people around her. Moreover, she is constantly urged by her mother towards marriage with wealthy Lord Mountclere "You see my dear Berta, marriage is a thing which once, carried out, fixes you more firm in a position than any personal brain can do" (HE203). Ethelberta with a pragmatic mind came to discern the importance of her mother's advice. Like Tess she is forced by her family to accept old, disolute, Mr. Mountclere. Patricia Ingham in Thomas Hardy (1989) observes:

> This crucial decision as to the placing of her hand in marriage is therefore a triumph of logic over Love, masculine reason over the softer womanly virtues. Ethelberta is *not a woman whose errant, impulses are suppressed for the sake of conformity with* the events that are to beffel her. That would be so if she had decided to marry the man she loves. On the contrary, she is a woman to whose will events are seen largely to conform (Ingham: 1989 37).

Hardy gives the plot of the novel the touch of the 'Comedy of Manners' of the Restoration period showing Ethelberta's lover in Rouens and in Paris asking her hand. Hardy through frivolous narrative technique shows desperation of lovers for Ethelberta and their competition for her. The ridiculous farce in the hotel in Rouens when three Ethelberta's suitors, all *attending on her in different room, and two of them leaning out of their* windows, recognize each other while overhearing the third's conversation with her. Here Mr. Mountclere 'frankly and earnestly asks Ethelberta to become his bride' (HE 247). Not only so, but he pressed her to consent have the ceremony performed before they return to England. Ethelberta, on the other hand in order to fortify her reason of marrying Mr. Mountclere sits up all night reading Mill's Utilitarianism. She finds arguments in support of her self-sacrifice:

> 'The ultimate end' she read 'with reference to and the sake of which all other things are desirable (whether we are considering our own good or that of other people) is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality....this being, according to the utilitarian opinion, the end of human action, is necessarily also the standard of morality' (HE 222).

A conflict occurs in Ethelberta's mind, whether her own happiness should or should not be preferred over that of others. Reading Mill's treatise she comes to the conclusion that her personal interest should not be considered more important than others: "The happiness which forms the standard of what is right in conduct is not the agent's own happiness but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator" (H E222-23).

Mill's writing provides her with ample reason for self-sacrifice and about the midnight she felt the necessity of marriage with Lord Mountclere. A daughter of a butler Ethelberta was always under the mental anxiety that her true identity might be revealed to the higher society. She thought whether it would be expedient to conceal from Lord Mountclere the circumstances of her position. She consulted a treatise on Casuistry: An old treatise on Causistry lay on the self. She opened it more from curiosity than for guidance this time. Ethelberta always finds justification for duty to her family as she does from her reading Mill's Utilitarianism. But her success is tinged with ambiguity. Ethelberta's upperclass transition is received less sympathetically by her family members. As the novel treats Ethelberta's mobility to aristocracy with force and satire, it also poses a question about Ethelberta's real achievement. Ethelberta gradually becomes alienated from her family. Her brother Sol, her father and her ex-lover Christopher, all react with horror to this decision of marriage beyond her class. For example her brother's angry comment: "Berta, you have worked to false lines. A creeping up among the useless lumber of our nation that'll be the fit to burn if there comes a flare. I never see such a deserter of you own lot as you be! But you were always like it, Berta, and I am ashamed of'ee. More than that, a good woman never marries twice" (H E 297).

Ethelberta's self-sacrifice fails to take the tragic trajectory as the narrative shifts its stress from the heroine's self-sacrifice to her fulfillment of ambition. Under the cover of opulence Ethelberta's tragedy remain concealed from our view. The conflict between her inner desire to return to her original self and her fictional artificial self creates a contradiction in her. It ultimately imparts her representation a tragic tone. Richard H.Taylor points out this ambiguity as he observes:

> Ethelberta's achievement is riven with ambiguity; she attains the social and economic status that she wanted, but it is uncertain whether she has not sacrified more than she has gained. Her progress is epigrammatically expressed as being 'from soft and playful Romanticism to distorted Benthamism', which begs the question which Hardy

asks but does not answer: 'was the moral incline upward or down?' (Taylor : 1982, 64-65).

Ethelberta being tired of her self concealment and burden of everyday deception for her professional advancement and upperclass mobility confesses to her father:

> Father, I cannot endure this kind of existence any longer. I sleep at night as if I had committed a murder: I start up and see processions of people, audiences, battalions of lovers obtained under the false pretences-all denouncing me with the finger of ridicule. .... I am sick of ambition. My only longing now is to fly from society altogether, and go to any hovel on earth where I could be at peace (HE 220). Under the false pretences-all denouncing me with the finger of ridicule. .... I am sick of ambition. My only longing now is to fly from society altogether, and go to any hovel on earth where I could be at peace (HE 220).

She seeks freedom from exploitative sexist society through death. Ethelberta, a victim of circumstances cannot escape the false pretensions considering her family's deteriorating economic conditions. Peter Widdowson in Hardy in History : A Study in Literary Sociology (1989) observes :

> Ethelberta's destructive consciousness of the falsity of her life (her ' self-killing', in D.H. Lawrence's phrase) and her longing to return to an earlier self, another 'reality' which pre-exists the one that now constitutes her life- one which is theoretically her 'true self'. But what the trajectory of the novel confirms is the delusion of these dreams: she can not escape the logic of her life. Indeed she marries Lord Mountclere - the ultimate symbol of her incorporation by the fiction of class, and the agency which, while enabling her to fulfill her 'duty' to her family, alienates her most completely from them; so that, by the end, she controls the estate, runs all her family's lives, but has herself disappeared from the novel - except as a distant figure who passes in a coach and is talked about with awe by her sister and erstwhile lover (Widdowson: 1989, 193).

The Hand of Ethelberta is unique in the sense that it converges its issues to a comic outcome after giving it the closure of a happy ending, but yet it could not attain the comic resolution through Ethelberta's individual class transition. Hardy appears to have compromised with the Victorian ideology but

on closer examination of the novel a tragic potentiality can be detected. Hardy presents Ethelberta as a woman with the spirit of self -sacrifice and duty. Despite her representation as a talented poetess, story-teller, a professed romancer and a good 'contriver', the author idealizes her through self-sacrifice and sense of duty conforming to the traditional notion of perfect womanhood. Self-abnegation was not only prescribed as womanly, it was considered a religious duty. (Carol Dyhouse in Laurence Lerner(ed) 1978,174). It was prescribed that women must remain passive, dependant and chaste. She should be concerned with private feelings only in a fantasy world she creates These Ruskinian ideas of feminine instruction stand to be criticized by Mill in The Subjection of Women(1860) observes:

> If women are better than men in anything, it surely is in individual self-sacrifice for those of their own family. But I lay little stress on this, so long as they are universally taught that they are born and created for self-sacrifice. I believe that equality of rights would abate the exaggerated self-abnegation which is the present artificial ideal of feminine character' (Mill: 1860 42).

Ethelberta is represented in terms of the Victorian ideologies of self-sacrifice, self-abnegation and duty. Hardy apparently shows justification of Ethelberta's marriage with old Mountclere. Her motive for marrying Lord Mountclere is not for self-advancement but for her dependent brothers and sisters. Hardy was influenced by the contemporary ideology of womanly duties. Ethelberta is materially and emotionally exploited by this traditional ideology to which he adheres. But Hardy's compromise is on the surface only and under the surface of compromise Hardy has shown ironically the sad plight of a talented poetess and story-teller.

Hardy calls Ethelberta's application of the utilitarian philosophy to the marriage question an operation, of her own as unjustifiable as it was likely in the circumstances,' 'unconscious misapplication of sound and wide reasoning 'and 'distorted Benthamism'. As Shanta Dutta in Ambivalence in Hardy (2000) observes:

> But although the gradient of Ethelberta's social climb is undoubtedly a regular graph, there is a deliberate ambivalence about her emotional or moral progress. Hardy himself tantalizingly raises the question through the narrator. 'Was the moral incline upward or down? (H.E.286). It is a crucial question but one which Hardy himself refused to answer; he deliberately left unresolved the questionof whether, for Ethelberta herself, achieved ambition also represents achieved happiness' (Dutta: 2000 34-35).

Hardy represents Ethelberta in the comic mode. If Hardy had not represented Ethelberta in the comic mode, a tragic potentiality of the heroine could have been more distinctly visible. At the end of the novel Ethelberta disappears from the novel and we are informed by Picotee that Ethelberta 'lives mostly in the library...She is writing an epic poem' (HE 320). Hardy's vision of marriage got gloomier and gloomier in each of his successive novels. In the next novel The Return of the Native Hardy radically shows tragic implications of love and marriage. But in this novel Hardy connives at the fact of Ethelberta's tragic potentialities as a heroine. As Richard H. Taylor observes: "The comic is realised but not without a sense that Hardy is constrained by the mode from investigating the deeper implications of the conclusion" (Taylor:1982,74). Under the guise of Comedy of Manners, Hardy studies the effect of 'modernism' on the psychic evolution of his heroines and this experiment he carried extensively on Eustacia, Grace, Tess and Sue. As Tim Dolim observes: "The very categories of selfhood, so precious to 19th century realism, are being dismantled in this 'real tragedy" (Dolin: 1997,32). In the next novel The Return of the Native, Hardy did not compromise with the Victorian conventions and he presents Eustacia as a confrontational womanhood which came to clash with the patriarchal values directly.