

SUBJUGATION OF WOMEN IN VICTORIAN SOCIETY WITH REFERENCE TO THOMAS HARDY'S *THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE*

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ABSTRACT

Discrimination and biasness in social, political, familial and economic life has been faced by women since time immemorial. The struggles for rights and freedom from social norms have been long and enduring ones. Women even in the most progressive societies of the world have experienced low status, exploitation, subjugation, and loss of freedom. Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) brings to light the harsh reality of treatment of women in Victorian society. This aspect of the novel may be illustrated by comparing present-day's conditions of women in the society with how Susan Henchard, Lucetta Templeman, and Elizabeth-Jane Newson are treated in the novel. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Thomas Hardy attempted to make Victorian society more aware of its treatment and attitude towards women. This object can be realized through the chief female characters of the novel, as well as through such minor figures as Mrs. Goodenough (the furmity seller), Mother Cuxsom, Mrs. Stannidge and Nance Mockridge of the Three Mariners Inn. Whether of high or low estate, women are consistently revealed either as insignificant workers or as pawns in male power-games in this late Victorian novel. The condition of women even today in this so called modern and highly advanced world is no better than before and she is still treated like an object/commodity/puppet in the hands of this male dominated and pretentious society.

KEYWORDS: Subjugation, Discrimination, Exploitation, Struggles, Domination.

Thomas Hardy is considered one of the greatest novelists of the latter half of the nineteenth century. He had an important place among the later Victorian novelists. Hardy wrote all types of novels- tragedies, tragi-comedies and comedies. He expressed his own views in his novels. Hardy became as famous for his Wessex Novels as Sir Walter Scott had become famous for his Waverly Novels. He is a great master of characterization. He had the knowledge of human character intensively and extensively. He did not create a vast range of characters. His men and women lead a life reduced to basic elements. It is said that Hardy had only heroines and no heroes in his novels. However, his women were all country born. They were not guided by reason and they even lacked good sense. They were victims of whims and changing moods.

The Mayor of Casterbridge (1886) by Thomas Hardy speaks about the ruthless realities of that age i.e. the Victorian Age. Thomas Hardy was a writer of the age when women were treated as commodities and they suffered a lot. They lived in a patriarchal society where they were deprived of their rights. Women hardly expressed their wishes but deep in their heart they wanted to be recognized in their families and society. Women had to sacrifice their desires to fulfil their responsibilities towards their families. In the novels of Thomas Hardy, we find such women characters that are meek and submissive. They were not even free to choose their life-partners. They were simply puppets in a male dominated society. Victorian society followed double standards for male and female. Thomas Hardy has shown his concern for women subjectivity and this is illustrated through the women characters-Susan Henchard, Lucetta Templeman and Elizabeth- Jane Newson in the novel.

The Mayor of Casterbridge begins with a dramatic scene that analyses female subjugation in Victorian Age as a result of male dominance. Michael Henchard- the protagonist of the novel sells his wife, Susan in an auction at the fair at Weydon-Priors as he was drunk. Henchard becomes restless till he finds a buyer for his wife for five guineas:

“I’ll sell her for five guineas to any man that will pay me the money and treat her well; and he shall have her for ever, and never hear aught o’ me. But she shan’t go for less. Now then- five guineas- and she’s yours.” (12)

Newson, a young sailor standing in the crowd agrees and gives the money demanded by Henchard. Susan feels very helpless and asks her husband not to do so. She warns him that:

“Before you go further Michael, listen to me. If you touch that money, I and this girl go with the man. Mind, it is a joke no longer.” (13)

But Henchard is not in his senses to realize what he had done. As a result, the sailor pays five guineas to Henchard and Susan accompanies the sailor along with her child named Elizabeth Jane. When Henchard comes to his senses, he tries a lot to find Susan and his daughter, Elizabeth Jane but all in vain. At last, Henchard goes to a nearby church where he took oath not to touch wine for next twenty-one years:

I, Michael Henchard, on this morning of the sixteenth of September, do take an oath before God here in this solemn place that I will avoid all strong liquors for the space of twenty-one years to come, being a year for every year that I have lived. And this I swear upon the Book before me; and may I be strook dumb, blind and helpless if I break this my oath. (18)

He is a bit relieved as made a start in a new direction. He starts on the search for Susan and Elizabeth Jane, but he achieves no success in the matter.

Henchard's auctioning off his wife to the sailor paying the highest amount at Weydon Fair confirms that even in that age women were treated badly and were regarded as commodities and the husband had freedom to treat her in any manner: "it has been done elsewhere" (13) asserts that such sales were very common in that period. Awaken from his sleep and realizing that Susan has indeed left with the "sailor who bought her and little Elizabeth Jane" (16). Henchard justifies that Susan's "extreme simplicity of her intellect" and her "idiotic simplicity" (18) has done him more harm than her bitter temper. He is still not accepting the truth that he has lost Susan and Elizabeth Jane not because of Susan's meekness but because of his own alcoholic abuse. He was in a confused state until he found his wife's ring and later found the sailor's bank notes in his pocket.

Susan returns to Henchard after eighteen years when she was unable to find Richard Newson and later it was reported that he was lost at the sea off the coast of Newfoundland. Although Henchard desired to be forgiven by Susan, he does not say so. Instead he gives a sealed envelope with a note to Elizabeth Jane to hand it over to Susan.

“He sat down at the table and wrote a few lines; next taking from his pocket-book a five-pound note, which he put in the envelope with the letter, adding to it, as by an after-thought, five shillings.” (65)

Although carried out in his library rather than in his office, this act looks suspiciously like another cash transaction on the part of a trader who makes his living by buying and selling commodities, and knows to a penny what it will take to make an acquisition. Even the speaker notes that Henchard's gesture of enclosing the bank-notes and coins "may tacitly have said to her [Susan] that he bought her back again" (66).

Henchard proposes Susan to remarry but he pretends as such as if he was going to perform a civic duty:

The visit was repeated again and again with business-like determination by the mayor. (77).

All the people of Casterbridge who were unaware of the truth felt that the Mayor was degrading himself by marrying Susan. The people were totally against the marriage and felt he was lowering his dignity by marrying such a poor fragile woman.

Through the above statement we infer that women were regarded status symbols and they were nothing more than commodities. People in Casterbridge were surprised at the decision of Henchard as Susan neither belonged to high class nor she was beautiful. Though Susan had a very small part in the novel but her character had symbolic significance. The narrow-minded attitude of the Victorian society is revealed through Susan's character.

Lucetta is destroyed by the attitudes of society. Lucetta is mocked at for much of her duration of existence in the novel. When the news of her intimacy is circulated in the town, she suffers condemnation and Henchard is not at all affected. Here, we can see the double standards of the society, one for male and the other for female. As a result of this intimacy, Lucetta suffers social disgrace (indicated by the Skimmington), a miscarriage, and later her death.

On the other hand, Elizabeth-Jane does not suffer at the hands of society. She suffers because of her fate; she lost her real father, Newson and came to Henchard's house with her mother. She is not exposed to the extent as Lucetta. For Elizabeth Jane, Henchard was the troublemaker. He was responsible for all her worries. The day Henchard re-marries Susan; he takes the responsibility of educating Elizabeth the manners of the society. He makes sure that she adapts to the lifestyle expected of the Mayor's daughter. In the beginning, he assumes that Elizabeth will take his name without objecting:

"You'll take my surname now- hey? (115).

We can say that Henchard neither cared for his wife nor for his child. The reason might be that the child was a female. But the things would have been different if Elizabeth Jane was a male child. Then Henchard would not have dominated her. Presently, Henchard imposed style of handwriting on her:

Henchard's creed was that proper young girls wrote ladies'-hand. (122).

He insulted her for not having written "a line of chain-shot and sand- bags". He behaved very harshly with her when he found out that she was not her daughter but was Newson's daughter.

Studying the female characters in Thomas Hardy's novels, we realize that all the female characters are victims of male dominated society. Talking about Susan, she never lived a contended life. She always suffered, firstly, in the hands of Henchard who sold her in the market as if she was an article to be sold. Secondly, her life with Newson was also not a happy one. As a result, she had health issues and she died untimely.

Sale of Susan in a market like a commodity can also be taken wrong by some of the writers, especially who are unaware of the condition of women at that time in England. But we know that such an activity in that period was quite normal. The sufferings are not only in the fate of Susan but all the women characters in the novel are simply puppets whose strings are in the hands of egoistic males. The passage below clearly depicts this:

"Five guineas", said the auctioneer or she'll be withdrawn. Does anybody give it?

'Yes, said a loud voice from the doorways

'You say you do?' asked the husband, staring at him.

"I say so" replied the sailor. (12-13)

The above passage clearly tells us about the dominance of Henchard over his wife and the helplessness of Susan who is not even able to oppose it. Susan's sufferings did not end there. The new husband, Newson after the sale asks her:

'That you swear?'

'I do' said she. (41)

Susan Henchard Newson accepts this as her fate that can never be changed and surrenders herself to Newson. She knew that it was her fate and hence she didn't protest.

It is very much possible that through such examples, Thomas Hardy wanted to advocate that middle-class marriages were no more than bargains that were disguised as ceremonies. Susan's marriage with Newson is the best example. Susan is the best example of the Victorian Age who had nothing but unlimited patience. She is a woman who suffers throughout her life, first because of Henchard and later, due to Newson.

It is not only through Susan that the plight of women in that era is depicted but Thomas Hardy has beautifully portrayed the character of Elizabeth Jane who also suffers a lot and shows us the darker sight of the female

characters. She also shares the same fate as her mother, Susan. Hardy has focused on her tragic life. She is very much different from Susan or Lucetta. She receives no formal education as she is born of poor parents but she is conscious of manners and conduct. She does not enjoy happy moments because of her sufferings. She thinks that happiness is momentary. She is aware of her not educated properly and suffers a pain:

"If they only knew what an unfinished girl I am", she said, "that I can't talk Italian, or use globes, or show any of the accomplishments they learn at boarding schools- how they would despise me!" (91)

Elizabeth Jane is a true, honest and straight forward person. She believes in old traditions and doesn't like any deviation from them.

Women characters in the novels of Thomas Hardy always fought for their rights and freedom but they were always beaten by male superiority and ego. Hardy had complete sympathy for female characters. As a result, he was often criticized for supporting female characters in his novels.

Present-day society's condition and outlook can also be compared to the dealing of Susan, Lucetta, and Elizabeth-Jane. Thomas Hardy attempts to bring awareness about the situation of women in that age through major as well as minor women characters. He says that women are treated as insignificant others in the Victorian Age.

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