



Social Ostracism in the Novels of Thomas Hardy

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ABSTRACT

Thomas Hardy was a renowned English novelist and poet whose literary career extended through Victorian and modern periods. He is celebrated as a writer of rural life and his novels are set in a fictitious area named Wessex which really indicates the south western region of England. His well known novels are 'Jude the Obscure', 'Tess of D'Urbervilles', 'Far from the Madding Crowd', 'The Mayor of Casterbridge', 'The Return of the Native' etc. The central themes of his novels include the human being's bonding with the society and the agony of alienation caused when that bond is severed off. The society in Hardy's novels is fiercely conservative, intolerant and often pitiless towards those who deviate from its fixed code of conduct. The paper attempts to analyze various aspects of the rustic society presented in Hardy's novels, focusing on its tendency to isolate its members for certain frailties in their character and conduct.

KEYWORDS : Ostracism, Isolation, Social acceptance, Repentance.

Introduction

Thomas Hardy, being a writer of rustic life in Victorian England, never hesitated to depict the nineteenth century English society with all its angelic and devilish traits. Several instances of rural virtue can be found in his novels, but at the same time, he bravely presented the darker side of the same society: a society that isolates its members and ostracizes them when they are badly in need of support and consolation. The individual has to live in constant fear of the society and put aside their dreams and desires which do not conform to the rules of the society. "There is the question of neighbours and society" (Jude the Obscure, pg no- 294) to be placed before any other consideration. Society holds a code of conduct for all its members and it is expected to be followed austere by everyone. When an individual violates this code, the society estranges and disowns him/her. It must be noted that the majority of the victims of such social rejection are his female characters, and their 'supposed sin' is somehow connected with illegitimate carnal indulgences for which, considering the situations delineated in the novels, these characters can hardly be blamed. But the Victorian society, with its rigid moral values, was quite adamant and unforgiving in the matters related to the chastity of women. It does not mean that men were immune to such social prejudices. We can see some of Hardy's male agonists, such as Jude Fawley in 'Jude the Obscure', being made an outcast along with his family. In an urge to regain social acceptance, some of these characters take certain desperate steps which ultimately lead to the final catastrophe. It is an open denial of an individual's most fundamental necessity and in many cases it results in chronic depression or a tendency for self annihilation. This is the tragic yarn that runs through most of Hardy's novels and he presents many of his characters as the martyrs of social ostracism.

'Tess of D'Urbervilles' is the most frequently pointed out example of Hardy's concern for the victims of stubborn social norms cherished by a conservative society. Tess is not a 'fallen woman' by choice. In her helplessness and naivety, she falls prey to the vicious intentions of Alec D'Urbervilles. Yet she singularly shoulders the burden of sin and suffers the stigma of disgrace alone. Deserted by her spouse and condemned by the society, she is forced to seek refuge in the arms of her seducer and faces death sentence for attempting to rid herself of the canker of sin by slaying him. It was a desperate action from the part of a victim of social rejection to wash off the stain of her 'fallen womanhood' and to be accepted by her husband and the society. "Never in her life – she could swear it from the bottom of her soul – had she

ever intended to do wrong; yet these hard judgments had come. Whatever her sins, they were not sins of intention, but of inadvertence, and why should she have been punished so persistently?" (51.8)

'The Life and Death of the Mayor of Casterbridge' presents a similar attitude of the society when Lucetta's letters to Henchard are made public and their furtive liaison is revealed. She is subjected to public humiliation as her and Henchard's effigies are paraded through the town and displayed as a symbol of their iniquitous conduct. The conservative society that mines out Lucetta's buried past and isolates her, ultimately causes her untimely death. Henchard, in his financially deprived and morally depraved position, views the array of effigies as the onset of bigger misfortunes. Here the society uses an evil ritual named Skimmington as a means of humiliation and symbolic ostracism of a helpless woman in her completely delicate condition of pregnancy, resulting in an epileptic seizure that kills her. She was too powerless to make efforts to retrieve her lost social position and acceptance. Instead she silently yields to death.

The society in 'Jude the Obscure' sticks on to the same conventional belief that a man and a woman must be allowed to share physical intimacy only within the institution of marriage. As a result, Jude Fawley and Sue Bridehead are ostracized for breaking the accepted social norms and even their children are not excluded from this brutal banishment. Jude is dismissed by his employer for engaging in a sinful alliance and consequently, it becomes impossible for them to lead a secured and settled life. Sue, haunted persistently by a relentless sense of guilt, gradually reaches an extremely fragile point of her life when she accepts the slaughter of her own children by Jude's legitimate son as the 'right slaying the wrong'. Her retreat to her husband symbolizes her repentance and return to the norms of the society, as a part of the deportee's struggle to regain social acceptance.

is not the first novelist to handle the theme of social ostracism and its effects on human psyche. The practice of social rejection is as old as primitive settlements where man first began his social life. It had been used as a means of punishing those who deviate from the socially accepted path of life. It had occasionally been practiced as a means of preventing the spread of communicable diseases. The banishment and the tortures suffered by the lepers and the sinful woman in 'The Bible' can be pointed out as an example for this custom. It had been used in various parts of Europe during eleventh and twelfth centuries under the influence of superstitions. The fear of black mag-

ic had led the uneducated commoners to segregate certain women who had been believed to be witches and the carriers of evil spirits. In medieval India, widows were isolated from the rest of the community and were forced to lead a secluded life as a part of the lifelong mourning for their dead husbands. Whatever the circumstances are, the forceful exile will undoubtedly affect the stability of one's psychological domain and make him doubt the meaning of his own existence. The individual's relationship with the society forms the links of a closely woven web that keeps him safe and sane and moulds his individuality. The power of this web usually remains obscure and misjudged until such a moment comes when the individual gets cut off from its links and is forced to stay detached from his fellow beings. He/she may continue to live in the same surroundings, but is subjected to perpetual neglect from his/her peers. William James says in his 'Principles of psychology, "A man's social life is the recognition that he gets from his mates...no more fiendish punishment could be devised, were such a thing physically possible, that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all the members there of." In such a situation, an individual is forced to adopt desperate measures for retrieving social recognition as we have seen in the case of Hardy's Tess and Sue Bridehead. Tess, "a pure woman", who is meek and gentle, stabs Alec to death in hope of turning a fresh leaf with her husband. She is not unaware of the consequences of this fatal action, but nothing bothers her when Angel Clare returns to her, ready to forgive her sins. Sue, the sexless woman who despises the institution of marriage, returns to her husband leaving her lover to face his doom alone. Hardy, who spent most of his life in villages, apparently identifies the threads of socio-cultural relationships of the rustic folk. He portrays the external and intrapersonal conflicts experienced by each of his characters realistically with a touch of romantic imagination. Though most of his novels are presented in third person, we undoubtedly feel the presence of the author in each and every fictional situation: when the characters are incapable of expressing their sorrow, the narrator does it for them. Hardy clearly understands the relevance of interpersonal relationships and the need to communicate with others in the life of every individual. The plots of his novels justify Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs where the need for love and belonging are placed at the third level of the pyramid of human needs. Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe dwelt for twenty eight years in solitude in an uninhabited island, yet during the last few years of his abidance there, he was blessed with the company of an unlettered savage. Thomas Hardy sired many characters that had solitary confinement forced upon them in the midst of an unfriendly crowd. In a sense this condition is even worse than that of Crusoe's. It is an unbearable experience to be frequently neglected and looked at with contempt by one's fellow beings. Hardy depicts the concept of social rejection from the side of both the parties: the persecutor as well as the victim.

Conclusion

Though Hardy has written several novels with a happy ending, his tragic works are the most widely sought after and appreciated ones in his credit, and they are called his masterpieces. He had firsthand knowledge of the psychology of the rural populace and could depict the simplicity of rustic situations with the mastery of a veteran. His novels provide ample instances of social ostracism and alienation which could easily be analyzed and depended upon by a student of social psychology.

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