Passion and Pathos of Women in the Novels of Thomas Hardy

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Life as it is lived by the character of Thomas Hardy’s novels, takes material, physical shape, colour, dimension, and form, from sense impression, sense experience, the life of the senses, and even the sixth senses. D.H. Lawrence observes that tragedy in Hardy’s novels is associated with the fate of the individuals revolting against the society’s conventional standards of behaviour. Women in Hardy’s novels struggle to achieve self-fulfillment in the society deeply entrenched in the Victorian concept of male superiority and female submission. Hardy kept firmly to his practice of presenting the voluptuous woman, the sexy woman, as neither dumb nor loose in morals. To bring moral seriousness and sexiness together in the single female form was not only to fly in the face of current convention, code and belief, it was also subversive. Hardy, the iconoclast, in presenting Victorians with female models who did not conform to the stereotypes, not only offended against proprieties but also threatened the status quo, hitting at the very structure and foundation of the society itself.

In Hardy, most alive of the men are the creatures of the intellect and the most alive of the women are the creatures of passion. “Passion is used with a spiritual significance, denoting ‘elements in the higher nature of man’ and covering Love, Religion, and Poetry—all three words being intended in a mystical sense”. We see Tess, Sue, Eustacia, Bathsheba and Elizabeth Jane love their lovers with intensity, without any calculated reason and at last their love tends to attain spiritual heights.

Hardy’s novels are love stories, dealing with the relationship between the two sexes. These relations are not only regulated by the internal jealousies and rivalries, class differences and economic circumstances but also by the various gender-based

2Thomas Hardy: A Study of the Wessex Novels, H.C. Duffin, 1916
concepts and ideologies of the society. Closely associated with the subject of love are the subjects of marriage, sex and divorce which Hardy dwells upon though less emphatically in the earlier novels than in the later ones as The Woodlanders, Tess of the D’urbervilles and Jude the Obscure. In these novels his women characters became increasingly independent, self-assured and liberal in the broad sense of the term.

To Hardy, as to Byron, love was women’s whole existence. He stresses their frailty, their sweetness, their submissiveness, their coquetry, their caprice. Even when they are at fault, he represents them with a tender chivalry. Hardy’s heroines Tess and Bathsheba, Thomasin and Grace are the victims of, Don Juan. Angel and Swithin and Knight inflict unmerited suffering on the women they love from a harsh, doctrinaire idealism that freezes the flow of natural compassion. In other words, each woman is encountering the lover who is to bring her to disaster.

Eustacia, the rebellious heroine of The Return of the Native should be the first instance. Her husband feels that she ‘ought always be to absorbed’ in him, and whose ‘individual existence’ should, according to ‘men’s imaginings’, most certainly be meditated by his desires. And here “between the desire and the act falls the shadow”. Eustacia is very much a prisoner in her world which she roams restlessly, night and day, yearning for freedom, action, passion—a yearning manifest in the burning fires she sets by night as becomes of her desire. Where Thomasin enacts the exemplary, dutiful, submissive forbearing wife, Eustacia burns with ‘smouldering rebelliousness’.

To be loved to madness—such was her great desire. Love was to her the one cordial which could drive away the eating loneliness of her days. And she seemed to long for the abstraction called passionate love more than any particular lover. (p.79)

The rapt joy of passionate love, of erotic bliss, of the translucent sublime—great desires indeed; and far removed from Thomasin’s world of low expectations and makeshift monogamous marriage.

Eustacia’s ache and suffering in love are expressed in a diverted way; in algolagnia—in taking pleasure in pain. She longs for exquisite pain, sublime erotic anguish. Her spirits begin at the very idea. It is a challenging, not a tame lover that she needs. She wants him vulpine, athwart, to match her own intensity of feeling. Eustacia craves sensation, and she has been starved of what she calls ‘life—music, poetry, passion, war, and all the beati ng and pulsing that are going on in the great arteries of the world’ (pp. 333-4). For her fundamental acceptance of non-exclusive love, she is caught in a double-bind. She knows that the marriage tie is not for her and she doesn’t know the conventional way of courtship altogether.

Again, Bathsheba’s maligned first interview with Troy—judged purely on the basis of literary skill, this is Hardy’s prose at its finest. It evokes sexuality poetically, yet the whole remains psychologically realistic; it is not only the act of love-making, but a material representation of inner, intangible desires.

In Far From the Madding Crowd’s microcosmic Victorian world the inescapable fact of male dominance and privilege is rigidly maintained. Bathsheba’s later experience is that marriage does stifle and compress her existence. It robs her of control of her estates and nullifies her legal existence. Bathsheba owns no legal means for recouping her losses as a married woman whose husband has sole control over her estates. She then has to face the ‘legal effects of her marriage…upon her position’.
Her tenure as James Everdene’s successor is now threatened by Troy’s legal ownership of her entitlement and by his jeopardizing of her good name. Ironically, despite the disadvantages of being female, young and beautiful, Bathsheba’s success as a single-woman-farmer is undone only when she takes on a male partner; that is, she marries.

Legal and sexual discrimination apart, as surely as Bathsheba attempts to maintain her independence and prove her talents, so Oak attempts to subdue and reduce her. And it is this subjugation that Hardy treats most comprehensively in Far From the Madding Crowd. There is bitter irony indeed in Bathsheba’s rejection of marriage. Again, it is Oak’s intrusion upon her privacy, his encroachment upon the space in which she tests and evaluates her sensory experience of the world, which robs her of judgment, free-will and self-determination. In spying upon her he steals her freedom. And this has far-reaching consequences. Oak’s espials and subsequent humiliation of her, lead indirectly to her tragic mismatch with Troy, with whom she had engaged primarily, at the level of private, lighthearted sexual exploration without guilt or shame or fear. Despite her later defensive cry to Oak that she will not allow any man to criticize her private conduct, Bathsheba is painfully aware that she has been deprived of that right. Her rage is the rage of one stripped of power. Oak’s induction of guilt and fear in Bathsheba, his compulsion to straighten her to conformity, to render her the ‘thoughtful…meek and comely woman’ (p-153), is morally unjustifiable to the modern mind. And in this respect, she gets the support from her author on this issue. Hardy’s floating images of compression, enclosure and theft shape an association between the author and the heroine. So it is upon Bathsheba’s vulnerability, her pain, her passion, Hardy’s sympathies turn and turn again. Bathsheba’s fearless spirit is finally broken. The vibrant, energetic heroine whose resourcefulness sustains a family property, a labour force and a farming community, blossoms into womanhood, ventures into business, into marriage, and is finally nullified.

My next emphasis is on Elfride Swancourt, the heroine of A Pair of Blue Eyes. She indulges in infantile emotionalism in her fairy-tale affair with Stephen Smith. She grows serious and sensible in the later part during her affair with the intellectual Knight. For Knight, Elfride is just an image of a spotless beauty or an unused object. The revelation of Elfride’s past affair with Stephen changes her from the first hand idol to that of the second hand. Elfride suffers from the male misreading of hers at the hands of both her lovers. She suffers measurably on her rejection by Knight. ‘Women accept their destiny more readily than men’. Elfride does not. She alters her course, with Stephen, not once, but twice(the broken elopement and the broken date to meet in the church), and finally rejects altogether the fate of becoming his wife. And she is patently not resigned to Knight’s sexual fastidiousness, nor to his attempts at domination, nor to his repudiation of her. Knight is a pathetic victim of his own sexual anxiety. Perverse in his desire to brutalize the very thing he values, he

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History as Repetition In Thomas Hardy’s Poetry, J. Hillis Miller, Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies,15, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and Devid Palmer.(p-237.)
fails to claim the one woman sexually empowered to rekindle his potency as she also kindles in him a heightened emotional and perceptual sensitivity.

Hardy’s intention is not to present woman with so exalted a concept of perfection that she must inevitably fall short of the ideal, but rather to break with this stereotype, to characterize an individual who is human and flawed, whose lovability is not contingent upon her perfection. Morally sensible, sexually aware and mortally imperfect, Elfride is worthy in her own right and to be valued not for what she ought to be but for what she is. Elfride’s growth to womanhood is mapped out in a series of hazardous journeys each of which is accompanied by one or other of the lovers. But every one of her voyages threatens or injures her, and on each there is a divergence of inner courses. Elfride mentally or emotionally voyages in one direction, towards an exploration and understanding of the world—he in quite the opposite. Stephen or Knight—neither is given the right to ‘own’ her and neither is given the satisfaction of claiming her death as his trophy. Elfride dies bearing another man’s love and another man’s life in her body. There will be no victory and no vindication for either hero.

For the woman Hardy shows a more tender solicitude than for the men, and in them, perhaps, he takes a keener interest. Vain might their beauty be and terrible their fate, but while the glow of life is in them their step is free, their laughter sweet, and theirs is the power to sink into the breast of Nature and become part of her silence and solemnity.

One such character is Tess. She is not just one of the greatest but also one of the strongest women in the annals of English literature. Tess is seen rebelling against her female stereotypical roles when she turns from a virgin to an unmarried mother and from deserted wife to a mistress. Alec may have appropriated her body but her spirit remains self-governing and unyielding. She wants to start anew with vivacity and courage. But how to annihilate the past and make new the day? How to transmute and actualize a renewed ‘self’ from the self the world has appropriated and labeled as fallen? To Alec she is Everywoman and Eve-temptress. To Angel, she is first stereotypical Goddess and later stereotypical fallen woman. To Hardy she is complex, diverse, unique on the one hand; fierce and gentle, regenerative and destructive, trusting and suspicious, philosophical, mystical and sexy on the other. This strong, active impulse in Tess to confront the past, to put an end to it, and to make new the day, urges Hardy to structure her story in such a way as to reflect both her regenerative powers, her rebounding will to act, and her physical, sexual powers of revitalization. Hardy places a rhythmic accent of her story to mirror her cyclical feminine life. It starts from her deflowering of chastity by Alec, her giving birth to a dead child, her heart’s need to baptize the baby, the religious objections arrived between her desire and the act, between salvation and damnation—the first part of her life ends here. The second part of her life starts with Angel’s arrival, his love and marriage to her and ultimately his brutal rejection after knowing her past.

Later Tess recounts her wedding night story with courage and ‘without flinching’. She does not even weep. Angel is shocked beyond measure, shocked at her self-possession, at her lack of remorse for her ruin at her lack of self-pity or self-abasement. It is he, instead, who withers and cowers. In the moment of ‘fall’, it is he who passively yields to emotional conflict fear and shock. Hardy vividly dramatizes
Angel’s moral weakness, his fall from being the caring lover who had sworn to ‘love and cherish and defend her under any conditions, changes, charges, or revelations’ (p.223). Angel casts a ‘Last Day’ judgement upon Tess. Tess still utters her last defense—

I love you for ever—in all changes, in all disgraces, because you are yourself. I ask no more. Then how can you, O my own husband, stop loving me? (Tess of the D’urbervilles, p.271)

Tess breaks; ‘Terror was upon her white face’ and the beautiful expressive mouth which had once reminded Angel of ‘roses filled with snow’ (p. 191) is blasted: and seeing her collapse, Angel becomes conciliatory. Angel, to a far greater extent than Tess, is formed and shaped by his past. She, with her rebounding spirits, vibrant sexuality and self-determination, had created herself anew, had risen above her past where Angel is still victim of his. The fallen woman is rendered dumb and mute, not by the seducer but by the lawful husband. The real poison in her life is not Alec but Angel Clair.

Hardy’s last polemical novel Jude the Obscure resounds completely a different note. Sue’s resistance to the notion that marriage should be the expressed goal of her sexuality is of central importance to the novel. Sue’s crushing defeat as the unhappy Mrs. Phillotson does not eclipse either her rebellious voice or her heartfelt principles. Sue’s campaign against the Institution of Marriage is rigorous, radical and militant. Victorian marriage codes are an anachronism to Sue. The notion strikes her as outrageous that a married woman should still be regarded as man’s property, or that sexual relationships should still require institutionalization in a modern society. She is conscious of the ‘torture’ of being obliged to submit and, as she explains to Jude, she is also conscious that many women do ‘give themselves to a man’ from consideration other than ‘real love’. Jude is the one male she respects, admires, and with whom she identifies herself. By the same token, he is the one male from whom she seeks respect, admiration, identification. Sue’s character is the admixture of peculiar juxtaposition. Her psychological move from a little-girl to an ennobled woman manifests her anxieties and approval-seeking mentality. As their relationship develops, it becomes increasingly difficult for Sue to break this behavioral pattern.

It is possibly due to her voluptuousness that Bathsheba failed to engage her live contemporaries in the anti-marriage question. So too Eustacia, whose erotic longings to be loved-to-madness, and moreover not by one man but by many, brings her down at the same level of prostitution. Tess’s lush sexuality upset contemporary readers for whom the voluptuousness and purity in a single woman is impossible. Sue is the least sexually responsive of all Hardy’s great heroines. She cohabits with three men in the course of her young life but remains in ignorance of her sexual needs with each. Her sense of resentment and oppression in the face of male authority communicates itself as a revulsion for all things male-dominated or bureaucratic. Marriage in Sue’s eyes is less a mutual understanding than the legitimization of a ‘sordid business’ granting one individual authority and power over another. And as far as she is concerned, her agreement with Phillotson was to their separate lives—not to her re-marriage to Jude. Sue’s attempt to work towards a mutually acceptable arrangement, as she puts it, ‘then we might be friends, and meet without pain to either(p.232) suggests a most
A sexless Sue is a disempowered Sue. She may test neither her own active powers, nor his. The power of deepest sexual engagement, which she is denied, becomes, in turn, a denial of full participation in caring and sharing, and ultimately a denial of sexual equality.

Romantic notion of love is criticized in the character of Eustacia who despite of her inner potentialities seeks fulfillment in the idealization of her lovers. Eustacia idealizes Clym, Elfride glorifies Knight, Bathsheba is swayed by the romantic charm of Troy, Tess finds Angel a perfection of masculine and intellectual beauty. All their vaulting passions ultimately culminate in terrible pathos.

Hardy’s each heroine was unorthodox by Victorian standards of femininity; they are humanly imperfect, unconventional, strong, sexually vital, risk-taking rebels. Each story manifests their bitter, frustrating struggle to define themselves in a world that would deny them the right to shape their own lives, control their own bodies, explore their own needs and express their own desires.

Lasgelles Abercrombie in his valuable book Thomas Hardy, A Critical Study, surveys that “The women whom the desire illuminates are not even its passing embodiments; they are simply the objects which, by being illuminated, make the illumination visible, just as sunlight is invisible until it meets with opacity. So it is only the gleaming of his own desire that the lover worships; each amour ends in the desire being once more disappointed of perfection, as soon as the lover is able to distinguish the woman underneath the dazzling transfiguration he himself has caused; the ideal love becomes a careless irony”.