



## British Feminism And Thomas Hardy With Reference to *Mayor of Casterbridge*

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### Abstract

Today women are determined to realize their full potential capacity and are ready to fight with anything that comes on their way. Today, the position of women in society has changed radically because of 'Feminist Movement'.

The first voice in favor of women's rights in west was in fact raised much earlier. The first major Feminist Manifesto, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* published in 1792, was written by Mary Wollstonecraft, who demanded equal opportunities for women in the field of education economics and politics. An attack on the social and economic system *A Vindication* strongly pleaded for women education and their protection by law. *A Vindication* was the first document where the full humanity of woman is asserted and her author insists upon its recognition.

Thomas Hardy's most striking aspect as a novelist is his portrayal of women. He has a gallery of everlasting female characters like Tess, Sue, Bathsheba, Eustacia, Elizabeth Jane, Elfride, Ethelberta, Grace, Mary, and Anne. Hardy's supreme power is delineator of women. His females are not only physically beautiful but they are more beautiful by heart. They live their lives with full of energy and confidence, they have desires to do something very special. They are ordinary women but at the same time not less than super heroines. They fight with situation and win in their own condition; they are not mute sufferer but rebel with situation. The aim of this paper is to find out the aspect of British Feminism in *Mayor of Casterbridge* with the help of women characters there in.

**Key Words:** Feminism, Women, Patriarchal Society and suffering of women.

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The term 'Feminism' was first used by French dramatist 'Alexender Dumas' the younger in 1872, in a pamphlet, "L". Home-Fomme to designate then emerging movement for women's rights. It's gradually emerged to be a worldwide cultural movement to secure equality of women with men in social, religious, political, educational, legal and economic fields.

Feminism is by definition is a movement to gain equal rights for women with men in social, political and economic fields. 'Feminism' means the difficulties she faces and suffers in the hands of man as well as by society.

The term 'feminism' has many different uses and its meanings are often contested. Some writers use the term 'feminism' to refer as a historically specific political movement in the US and Europe; other writers use to refer to the belief that there are injustices against women. Feminism seems to involve at least two groups of claim; one normative and the other descriptive. That women and men ought to have equal rights and respect is the normative claim; and the women are denied equal rights and respect functions as the descriptive claim. Feminism is grounded on the belief that women are oppressed or disadvantaged by comparison with men, and that their oppression is in some way unfair or unjustified. Feminists are not simply those who are committed in principle to justice for women; but they take upon themselves the responsibility to bring about social change on women's behalf. Very broadly, then one might characterizes the goal of feminism as an effort to end the oppression of women. Bell Hooks argues:

"Feminism, as liberation struggle, must exist apart from and as a part of the larger struggle to eradicate domination in all its forms. We must understand that patriarchal domination shares an ideological foundation with racism and other forms of group oppression, and that there is no hope that it can be eradicated while these systems remain intact. This knowledge should consistently inform the direction of feminist theory and practice."(1)

Feminism is an expression of resentment against the unjust treatment meted out to women. It is the expression of the refusal of women to be treated as a doormat or a piece of furniture meant for convenience of man. Feminism intends to rebel against the hostile environment in which a woman is forced to live. It is a struggle against hardships, neglect and dual moral standards to which women are subjected. Feminist literary criticism studies literature by women for how it addresses or expresses the women's lives and experiences. And





it also studies the male-dominated canon in order to understand how men have used culture to further their domination of women.

The meaning and implication of feminism are not the same everywhere, because it depends a lot on socio-cultural factors. French Feminism is concerned more about the physical suppression of women in the world of men. American Feminism is more outspoken where women believe in self-assertion and expression on the physical, intellectual, emotional or every other possible level.

The woman today has her own quest, a personal quest for self-discovery and self-fulfillment. Feminism suggests that women are troubled but other structure of oppression. One common fact that women are physically less powerful than men, and can be subjected to violence and rape. They often believe in their own inferiority, because the rule of father identifies patriarchy at works in the home and in the state the Church or other religious systems like law, education systems, the workplace, etc. Feminist politics seeks to uncover and to change these structural inequalities.

As I have already written the first voice in favour of women's rights in was major Feminist Manifesto, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* published in 1792, was written by Mary Wollstonecraft.

Similarly, the singular contribution made by John Stuart Mill to the arousal of feminine consciousness cannot be overlooked, of all his works, *The Subjection of Woman* (1869) showed serious concern over some of the issues earlier raised by Wollstonecraft. Like her he also felt the need for improved education for woman in all sphere and said that the power of earning is essential to the dignity of woman. He also pleaded for their right to practice arts and for them right to vote.

In *Mayor of Casterbridge*, we meet three women, of whom one, namely Elizabeth-Jane, Lucetta and Susan in the first chapter. Story starts with wife-selling scene of Susan in a fair. Henchard wants to sell his wife for five guineas to anybody who will offer that amount to him. "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 forever, and never hear aught O'me. But she shan't go for less. Now then, five guineas-and she's yours. Susan, you agree?"(2)

She is mute sufferer in the hands of her husband, and then after by her buyer. She is official wife of Henchard, but mercilessly sold by him. And Newson buys her, but does not marry her. He keeps her like a mistress rather a wife. She has an illegitimate daughter. She is a matter of property for both the males. They treat her like a non-living thing, commodity or a





piece of furniture, which used it and if they don't need they sold off. Newson could get marry to Susan and give her the respect as a legal wife. But he did not perform this, just because he purchased her. Society is also responsible for her suffering. At times when she was selling by her husband, no one stops her to do the same; in fact she is purchased by a person. If anyone from the mob comes and stops this trade of a human being, this will not be happened with her.

She has all the female qualities; she is warm, gentle, and submissive like an ordinary middle class woman. But she has the feminist qualities also. She tries to save her position in society. She protests her selling but failed. She said to Henchard, "'Now', said the woman, breaking the silence, so that her low dry voice sounded quite loud, '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.'" After sold by her husband, she moved on and accept the destiny of her life "I do, said she, after glancing at her husband's face and seeing no repentance there." (3) It is strange, indeed, that a sane young matron could believe in the seriousness of such a transfer. But she did believe that the transaction was binding upon her and she lived as Newson's wife for a number of years. Susan did not have a happy life. Henchard had shown her nothing but temper. "'Mike', she said, I've lived with thee a couple of years, and had nothing but temper; Now I'm no more to 'ee; I'll try my luck elsewhere. Twill be better for me and Elizabeth-Jane, both. So good-bye;" (4) She takes her new life positively; she does not blame any more to Henchard, and go ahead for her new life with Newson.

Lucetta Templeman is one of the many memorable feminine characters created by Hardy. Lucetta 'the artful little woman' he said smiling. She herself said "I am a very ambitious woman". (5) Lucetta Templeman is the daughter of a military officer, plays a leading role in the development of the story. She has been portrayed in much greater detail than Susan. Lucetta is depicted as a bright young woman, smart, elegant, and well-bred. She is highly accomplished. She is young and extremely pretty like Hardy's other females. She is educated and enlightened, cultured and refined. She speaks French and Italian fluently, even Elizabeth very much impressed by her education. She is very conscious about her beauty and procures the dresses of the latest style from London. She spends much of her time in making appropriate choice from vast varieties. She always tries to enhance the effect of her exquisite beauty and charm on others. She is really a very beautiful and charming woman.

Besides these physical and social attractions, she possesses a kind and very sympathetic heart. She would not mind her servants having lovers if they so desire. She consoles and comforts Elizabeth-Jane when they meet first and Elizabeth-Jane is in a state of distress. But Lucetta has her failing also. She is also very weak-minded. She stands in terror of the disclosure





of her former intimacy with Henchard, and appeals to Henchard in a most pathetic manner not to betray her. If she had been more practical or more courageous she would have told Farfrae the whole thing before marrying him. On seeing the skimmity-ride, she faints with terror, and her illness proves fatal. There is no doubt that she is essentially a good woman who wins our genuine sympathy. Nor is there any doubt that she has been made truly to live in the pages of the novel in our minds.

She is a woman of female and feminist qualities. She has respect for Elizabeth-Jane, without knowing her she offers her job and keeps her in her house as a friend. She offers money and wants to help Henchard her old lover. But to save her relationship between them from society she asks her love-letter to him, which she has written on account on their love-affair.

She suffers in the hands of Henchard and society. For her death unsocial elements are thoroughly responsible. She has an affair with Hanchard and wants to marry him. She is also treated like Susan by Henchard. On account of not marrying to her Henchard has sent her a letter and money. For Hanchard woman is the property of selling and purchasing. For him woman is commodity, he compares a woman's respect with money. He first sold off his wife than to give her judgment he sends money for not marrying Lucetta. In spite of this activity shown by Henchard Lucetta again made up her mind to welcome him. But because of circumstances she could not meet Henchard. And at the same time Farfare comes to her home and she falls love with him in her first meeting.

Elizabeth Jane her face, though somewhat man and incomplete, possessed the raw-materials of beauty in a promising degree. What strikes us most about this girl is her gloomy outlook upon life. Though she has received no education, she is instinctively something of a philosopher. She looks upon life as a tragical, rather than a comical thing. She believes that moments of gaiety are few in life and that these moments are no real part of the actual drama of life. She had this pessimistic view of life when she was still young. Her subsequent experiences merely confirmed her in view: "Her experience had been of a kind to teach her, rightly or wrongly, that the doubtful honour of a brief transit through a sorry world hardly called for effusiveness". (6)

Elizabeth-Jane is rather crude, less-educated, and without any accomplishment, the third female but most important character in *Mayor of Casterbridge*. She has no dash. She is painfully aware of this deficiency in herself: "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 ;"(7) She often feels miserable to realize that her





tastes are not good enough for her position as the daughter of a mayor. One grievous failing of Elizabeth is her frequent use of dialect words which irritated and annoyed Henchard who often scolds her for her ignorance. Her handwriting, too, is not fined as cultured women should be. In order to make up for her deficiency, she began industriously reading books. She reads and took notes incessantly, mastering facts with painful laboriousness. Her industry also shows itself in the manner in which she works at netting in order to earn her own livelihood when she is living independently.

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, the promising character of Elizabeth Jane suffers at the hands of Henchard who is in beginning of the novel, acts as a typical patriarchal father. He gives her his name, a label, by which she becomes like one of the wagons owned by him bearing his name plates, an asset he can look upon as an extension of his own self. He berates her for using dialect words or being too kind to the servants and thus failing to keep public image as regard to his social status. He ignores her individual feelings when he sends her for dancing with his rival Farfrae. Henchard's ownership towards Elizabeth Jane is depicted in the wife-sale scene in the very beginning, when he says of the child Susan taken along with her as she follows Newson: "She'd no business to take the 'maid-it is my maid'". (8) Even years later his attitude to Elizabeth Jane is the same as that of an object to be possessed and commanded at will. Even when Henchard actually starts loving Elizabeth Jane as a daughter after his fall from the mayoral position, his love for her is not without the feelings of a jealous possession. We are told how he is terrified at the prospect of Elizabeth Jane becoming increasingly independent in various matters and how jealously he observes the growing relation between Elizabeth Jane and Farfrae. His lie to Newson, the result of his fear of losing Elizabeth Jane also becomes an act of deception in Elizabeth Jane's eyes that is so trustworthy.

Like other heroines of Hardy, Tess, Jude and Eustacia, Elizabeth-Jane is the finest example of feminine beauty. She is heroine of the novel and first presented to us "appeared as a well-informed young woman about eighteen, completely possessed of that ephemeral precious essence, youth, which is itself beauty, irrespective of complexion or contour." (9) It is also to be noted that she has a certain sense or respectability which makes her object to her mother's speaking to the furmity woman, because the furmity woman looks extremely haggard, wrinkled, dirty, and is almost in rags. When Susan returns to Elizabeth-Jane after having had a little talk with the furmity-woman, Elizabeth-Jane says to her: "Mother. Do let's go on-it was hardly respectable for you to buy refreshments there. I see none but the lowest do." (10) Even in the Inn when she has not enough money to pay, so instead of taking help she decides to perform the duties of a temporary waitress and serve food to the guests in order to pay the landlord in kind for a lodging and for food for herself and her mother. Hardy makes a comment





on this act of her, “If there was one good thing more than another which characterized this single-hearted girl it was willingness to sacrifice her personal comfort and dignity to the common weal.” (11).

Elizabeth Jane’s practical approach to life leading to the self-integration of her personality is what ensures her survival through many odds in life. Unlike Henchard and Lucetta, her tendencies are not to destroy herself rather it in a positive manner. At the face of roughness on the part of Henchard and Lucetta, she does not allow herself to be broken but takes on her own way in a dignified manner. Here is a realistic point, which is voiced at the end of the novel. If on one hand, she believes in a kind of contentment to be achieved by “making limited opportunities endurable” (12), on the other hand, as is hinted in the text, she is strongly conscious that there is an unjust distribution of blessings in many cases.

“But her strong sense that neither she nor any human being deserved less than was given, did not blind her to the fact that there were others receiving less who had deserved much more.”(13).

Elizabeth Jane’s philosophy is not of the sacrifice of self but of the preservation of self by making it the vulnerable. It does not mean submission or negation but learning from the experience and keeping one’s eyes open to reality s as to develop a positive attitude.

Susan, the wife of Henchard, Lucetta, lover of Henchard, and Elizabeth Jane step-daughter of Hanchard, all is having feminist qualities in them. After sold by her husband Susan started a new life with new husband, after deceived by Henchard, Lucetta got married to Farfrae and Elizabeth chooses a new life for her. They all are the victims of man but they never let down their morals and get ahead to new ways and paths in their lives.

Through all the three characters, we can find the Victorian society is male-dominated society. Neither law nor society claims both the man for suffering of women. All the female characters are suffered in the hands of men and society. Although they are aware of their rights, they feel suppression, depression and then fight with situation and win the life.

Hardy’s portrayal of women in the light of his gradual drift towards the feminist stance is closely linked with his growing sympathy for the women who are the victims of the patriarchal system of society. Hardy’s sympathy for the women victims is synonymous with his criticism of the male characters that are unable to break themselves free from the contrasting mores and assumptions. The phallogocentric views of men also lead them to misread or





misinterpret women's character and behaviour. This causes a great deal of sufferings in this respect draws sympathy from the readers.

One of the chief characteristics of Hardy's work is the dominance of women characters in his fiction. His deep sympathy for women lies in the emotional rendering of their sufferings in the society, passing through the transitional phase from conventionalism to modernity. 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. To say that Hardy shows considerable sympathy for women caught in this mesh might sound an exaggerated view for those who find his novels littered with female stereotypes and misogynist generalizations about women.

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