



## VICTORIAN IDEALS AND SEPARATE SPHERES IN THOMAS HARDY'S *TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES*

**DR. PINKI NEGI BORA**

Assistant Professor

SRIMT, Lucknow

(UP) INDIA

### ABSTRACT

*Tennyson the Victorian poet laureate reflects the unjust system of British patriarchal society in his celebrated work The Princess. It is essential to understand that the notorious term 'patriarchy' stands for the social laws and rules which consider men as the pivot of the society and allow them to dominate and suppress women. Men in patriarchy consider themselves as master of non-existent sex i.e., women, which results in sexual harassment or rape. To retain their superiority over women, men used their sexual power. Patriarchy is divided into two main forms on the basis of division of labor: private patriarchy and public patriarchy. Private patriarchy is principally based on the confinement of women in the domestic sphere where father or husband is the direct oppressor. Private sphere stands for "the world of domesticity, morality and women"<sup>1</sup>. In public system of patriarchy women has no role to play. It is this set up which generated men's unlawful authority to treat women as slaves.*

### INTRODUCTION

*Man for the field and woman for the hearth*

*Man for the sword and for the needle she*

*Man to command and woman to obey*

*Or else confusion*

Patriarchal society approves sexual difference and domination of men over women. The subordination of women and domination of men is not intrinsic. It is sex segregation and labor division which make one sex superior to the other. Women are regarded as inferior sex in the patriarchal world and therefore excluded from the socio-political affairs. The patriarchal society refuses the obtrusion of women in public sphere and confines them to

**DR. PINKI NEGI BORA**

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private sphere where they keep themselves happy with their discontented position. Gradually this contentment results in economic dependence and their seclusion from public sphere and it is realized that

*“women’s subordination is due to their confinement to the private sphere”<sup>2</sup>.*

Men precluded women from entering the public realm and refrained them to strengthen their position as human beings. Women were considered as non-social entity, as they had no right to establish their individuality in men’s world. Mill also accepts the belief that the sole duty of married women is to look after their house and children while the responsibility of men is to fulfill the basic needs of the family. He accepts the division of labor, which gives rise to sexual discrimination and thus in true sense, Mill too cannot be termed as a feminist author like Thomas Hardy.

Hardy’s novels reflect the true picture of the nineteenth century society in which the position of women was as good as slaves. His heroines can also be called inferior males who are ruled by superior males. In the eighteenth and the nineteenth century, Negroes were treated by the whites as their possession and were physically and financially exploited. The same condition was with the women of the nineteenth century. Women were enclosed within the four walls where their main job was to satiate men’s physical hunger. Those who pleased men physically were called feminine and those who did not do so were labeled as unfeminine and unnatural. The idea proves that

*“Men are the colonizers, the women colonized and as Simone De Beauvoir perceives it, the position that women occupy in the society is comparable in many respects to that of racial minorities in spite of the fact that women constitute numerically at least half of the human race”<sup>3</sup>.*

Hardy’s male characters are always found strong in their utterances. They are also patronizing, domineering, strong and commanding. Hardy’s heroines have some weaknesses and uncertainties, which make their life tragic. Hardy’s cruel treatment with his women characters is clearly depicted in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*. Tess Durbeyfield, the heroine after whom the title of the novel is named is represented by Hardy as the victim of the Victorian patriarchal society. Tess was a beautiful and innocent girl of sixteen and the eldest child of the Durbeyfields, thus it was her duty to carry out her family’s responsibilities. She herself went to Casterbridge to deliver the beehives to the retailer. In the midway she met with an accident in which her family’s horse, Prince the source of their livelihood died. After the horse’s death she blamed herself for the mishap. She was emotionally blackmailed by her parents. Her mother caught her weakness and broached a scheme against her. She held Tess



responsible for putting her family in quagmire by killing their breadwinner. This guilt feeling and sense of responsibility refrained her from further studies and provoked her to sacrifice her aspirations for the sake of her family. Tess was a possession of a patriarchal father who had every right on his daughter and therefore he exercised his unlawful authority on her, according to which he shifted his own responsibilities on her shoulders. The parents used Tess' beauty and youth to allure Alec, a wealthy and a licentious man. Tess for her irresponsible parents was a medium of economic security and social upliftment.

This attitude of her parents was shameful and degrading who used their daughter's beauty as a trump card to allure Alec, a violent and a lusty man. Tess was reluctant to go to Trantridge as she did not like Alec for whom women were no more than a sexual object. She was suspicious about Alec since the very beginning as he always tried to take advances towards her. She told her mother about Alec but her mother was an opportunist who wanted name, fame, wealth at the expense of Tess' happiness. When Alec failed to dominate Tess with his physical charms, money and prestige, he committed the heinous crime of raping the girl and proves his hollow masculinity. Her molestation by her master, Alec reflects the true picture of the nineteenth century England where

*"the maid servant had been the major sexual opportunity of a closed and prurient society. 'Economic control seemed to guarantee erotic control'"<sup>4</sup>.*

Tess was just a sixteen year old girl when she stepped out into the outer world without receiving any instruction from her mother about the dangers of the society in general and men in particular. The victimization of Tess began when she headed to Trantridge to restore the family's prosperity. After reaching Trantridge, Tess had had one of the worst experiences of her life which converted her into an unwed mother. The molested unwed mother and illegitimate child, Sorrow were considered stain on patriarchal society and the man, Alec who was the cause of their destruction converted into a missionary from a rapist. His conversion indicates that man retains his honour even after violating the honour of a woman. For her molestation, it was Tess who withstood social scorn. Her seducer was respectable before the mishap and even after the mishap.

From feminist perspective Alec's act implies that women are vulnerable creatures due to their tender bodies and therefore need male's shelter for their protection. Hardy indirectly gives cue that any effort of women to come out of the precincts of the private sphere to establish their identity can be proved very fatal as it happened in the case of Tess. This devaluation in their individuality converted women into mere objects of sexual gratification.



After the sudden death of Sorrow, Tess was again in the clutches of depression but for her family she managed to overcome her dejection and again left her home for the second time to provide happiness and comfort to them. Here she met Angel Clare, who fell in love with her and made frequent request to marry him. At last Tess broke up and decided to reveal her past to him (her molestation by Alec and her illegitimate dead child). Again it was her hard luck; she could not muster the courage to confess Angel her past life. She wrote a letter to her mother and asked her what she should do in this crucial situation, her mother replied not to reveal out her past and get married to him. But being honest in her love, her conscience did not allow her to deceive him. She slipped the letter in his room, which got hidden beneath the carpet and couldn't reach Angel. When Tess learnt that he has not got the letter, she got anxious and told him that she wanted to tell him something about her all

*“faults and blunders”<sup>5</sup>.*

On the wedding night Angel confessed to Tess that he had spent forty eight hours of his life with a stranger and he did not tell about it to her because of the fear of losing her. Tess forgave him for his act but the same response did not come from Angels' side. Being the conventional member of the conventional society his false male ego and empty pride did not allow him to accept unchaste Tess. She was ruined by her unjust husband who demanded purity and virginity from her, the very characteristics which he himself was devoid of. Angel censured Tess for not retaining her virginity and reprobated her for producing illegitimate offspring while condemning her he ignored his own sin which was more heinous than hers' as his was a deliberate one and thus he proved himself as a man of double standard. The sex segregation also segregated the sin of Tess and Angel. As he himself was a dissolute man his sin reduced into nothing and provided him the ground to desert Tess for her unchastity. This is really strange that Victorian men demanded

*“all those traits of softness, domesticity, and fidelity which a harsh business world had led them to deny in themselves”<sup>6</sup>.*

The social structure of the nineteenth century was rotten; it was a phalocentric conventional society with old beliefs, which maintained that purity characterizes the girl whereas men could have extra affairs out of wedlock. Angel subsided Alec's sin and the harm which he did to Tess, in this he way he supported Alec and his sin. Angel harmed Tess more than Alec. He neglected her devotion, her single mindedness, her true love for him, her honesty and on the whole her spiritual chastity and decided to desert the innocent girl. His prompt and wrong decision had dire consequences in her later life which first prompted the girl to become the mistress of her seducer and later his murderess.



Angels' shallowness and hypocrisy led Tess to a wrong way where again she met Alec. His thoughtless judgment brought Alec back in her life. From the very outset of the novel Alec had no love for Tess, it was only his sexual hunger and her beautiful body which drew him nearer to Tess in the beginning and even at the end of the novel. It was her poor financial circumstances and the onus of her family, which provoked her to accept the offer from the man who was the cause of her rejection and destruction. But before surrendering herself to Alec she wrote a very pathetic letter to Angel to come and save her as she has endured more than she deserved. But she did not get any response from Angel and her firm determination weakened when Alec told her that Angel will never come again and he has gone forever. Hardy's males know the way of moulding the situation in their favor and his heroines are too innocent to understand their tricks. Her humiliating surrender before Alec was surprisingly disappointing as her resignation signifies the victory of stronger sex over the weaker sex.

Once again Alec became the master of her body but once again failed to govern her soul. Alec's victory over her was partial because he won her physically, but her heart and soul still pined for Angel. Joan Durbeyfield was a selfish mother who did not stop her daughter to surrender herself before Alec to overcome proletariat class. She proved herself as a callous mother who very well knew that Alec was Tess' seducer who after assaulting her did not turn up to bear his responsibilities. He did not get married to her and left her in the patriarchal society with a stain and again he wanted her back in his life just to satiate his sensual appetite.

One day the unexpected return of Angel made Tess feel that she had once again lost her god because of Alec who told her a lie regarding his return and in her fury for her oppressive and conventional husband, Angel she murdered Alec. Angel's hasty judgment and her family's dire need converted the innocent Tess into degraded concubine of Alec and eventually his murderess.

*" I hate him now, because he told a lie-that you would not come again; and you have come!"<sup>7</sup>*

Tess was given capital punishment for this murder. Her life full of troubles and misfortunes was itself a punishment, but the ultimate death brought her salvation.

Tess' character reflects the whole woman kind of the Victorian age in which women were deprived of equal education and fundamental rights unlike men. Women lacked freedom of articulation to express their views and desires. They were not persons but only women, inferior sex whose prime duty was to devote themselves to their family and men's wishes. Women can lead a solitary life without anybody's support but it is men only who do not want



them to be self dependent and produce one or the other critical situation before them and compel them to take physical as well as mental support of the male to establish their superiority. To sustain their superiority and masculinity men oppress women and want them to accept injustice without any utterance. This could be possible by confining them within the household sphere where they were given traditional roles to perform and these traditional roles deprived them of their fundamental rights and checked them to present themselves as equally important sex. The necessity is to provide women with equal opportunity so that they can also give their best to the society and emerge as equivalent sex. Now it is a high time to convert the dream into reality by abolishing the unjust laws of patriarchal system and allowing women to actively participate in socio-political world.

Women must realize that patriarchal system has reduced them into non-entity. The requirement is to refuse the stereotype roles and try to emancipate themselves from subjugated position, explore their inner abilities, potentialities and in this way they would be able to define themselves as potential sex.

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