Chapter I: Introduction

Feminist readings of Thomas Hardy’s work, especially of the major novels, abound. Though not much work has been done with regard to his shorter fiction, the gender matrix in these stories, however, is a rich area for investigation. In *DR* (1871) Hardy states,

> In spite of a fashion which pervades the whole community at the present day – the habit of exclaiming that woman is not undeveloped man but diverse … the fact remains that, after all, women are Mankind, and that in many of the sentiments of life the difference of sex is but a difference of degree. (DR, II, Ch. 2, Pt 4)

The shorter fiction of Thomas Hardy is a product of its time slotted into a cultural matrix that can never be recreated. What we can do, however, is to use feminist approaches and theories of gender to critically analyze this body of work in an attempt to show – in terms of what is posited in the title – the “gender matrix” in Hardy’s shorter fiction; how gender intersects with culture, history, class, sex and sexuality. Hardy’s constructions of gender lead him to complex female protagonists who refuse to be interpreted in essentialist terms. They are conceived within the power relationships of society but go on to challenge and subvert paternalist sexual imaginations with its notions of essentialist feminity and straightforward gender patterns attributed to sexes. Indeed, even the masculine ideals are shown as highly problematic. Hence my thesis will attempt to examine Hardy’s attitude to and treatment of his female characters and of course, the inevitable relationship between his men and women in his shorter fiction to support his conviction that “Women are Mankind.”

As early as 1878, in *The Return of the Native*, he spoke of the “Irrepressible New” and nothing was more irrepressible than the “New Woman.” The Woman Question Debates that raged on both sides of the Atlantic were complex, views and
opinions hardly converged and could not be explained absolutely along the lines of sex. A new radical uncertainty was emerging and some of the questions that were being asked were – What constituted the nature of woman? What was her status and role? What difference did class make? What was the relationship of women to men? And what was her destiny? An attempt to answer these questions will hopefully weave the chapters that follow into a single whole and throw light on Hardy’s thesis that “Women are Mankind.”

A serious study of Thomas Hardy’s much neglected short fiction will no doubt reveal that beneath the seemingly funny, at times fantastical stories lies the crucial issue of gender and gender relationships which goes to suggest that Hardy’s women possess an “instinctive self-respect, an instinctive purity” and that “the so-called difference of sex is but a difference of degree” (DR, Part 4). Hardy’s women can be unconventional and original. He is the only male Victorian writer who allowed his women greater liberty and in doing so captured the spirit of the age – an age of changes, when the New Woman was seen to emerge out of her cocoon as a fully developed, beautiful and startling creature. The women in Hardy’s short fiction foreshadow not just Tess but also Sue Bridehead. This ability to capture the diverse nature of woman is Hardy’s strength. “Taken together the stories constitute a significant body of fictional output informed by Hardy’s characteristic moral and artistic predilection” (Hasan, 127).

It is amazing how little is known about Thomas Hardy’s shorter fiction, considering the fact that he wrote nearly fifty short stories – Wessex Tales (1888), A Group of Noble Dames (1891) Life’s Little Ironies (1894) and A Changed Man and Other Tales (1913). These stories were written between 1874 and 1900 – around the time that he wrote his major fiction. “The care with which he revised and arranged
many of these stories suggests that he took much interest in them as in his other writings” (Hasan, 104). An early reviewer of the anthology of the short stories commented, “If he had produced nothing but the short stories that have been assembled in this fat volume, what an abounding legacy of human histories he would have left behind” (Gibson, 148-149). Before this “legacy” of short stories can be examined to assess their relevance to a study of gender relations, a comprehensive research is required on the impact made on women, in general, by the social infrastructure and religious interpretations prevalent at the time.

The social structure of sixteenth century Europe allowed women limited opportunities for involvement; they served largely as managers of their households. Women were expected to focus on practical domestic pursuits and activities that encouraged the betterment of their families, and more particularly, their husbands. In most cases education for women was not advocated – it was thought to be detrimental to the traditional female virtues of innocence and morality. Women who spoke out against the patriarchal system of gender roles or any injustice ran the risk of being exiled from their communities or worse, vocal unmarried women in particular were the targets of witch hunts. Anne Hutchinson, who challenged the authority of Puritan clergy, was excommunicated for her outspoken views and controversial actions. Anne Askew, a well-educated, out-spoken English Protestant was tried for heresy in 1558, her denial of transubstantiation was grounds for imprisonment. She was eventually burned at the stake for her refusal to incriminate other Protestant court ladies. Elizabeth-I, ascended the throne in 1558, a woman who contradicted many of the gender roles of the age. Within this period, Shakespeare’s representation of women and the ways in which his female roles are interpreted and enacted have become topics of scholarly interests.
Shakespeare’s heroines encompass a wide range of characterizations and types. Within the gallery female characters, Shakespeare’s women characters display great intelligence. These qualities have led some critics to consider Shakespeare as a champion of womankind and an innovator who departed sharply from flat, stereotypical characterizations common to his contemporaries and earlier dramatists. Contrastingly, other commentators note that even Shakespeare’s most favourably portrayed women possess characters that are tempered by negative qualities. They suggest that this indicates that Shakespeare was not free from misogynistic tendencies that were deep-seated in the culture of his country and era. Deeply influenced by classical drama and by Shakespearean tragedy, Hardy framed his own tragic pattern. Hardy himself states in his diary: “a tragedy exhibits a state of things in the life of an individual which unavoidably causes some natural aim or desire of his to end in a catastrophe when carried out.” Hardy also wrote that his art consisted in intensifying “the expression of things”. Hardy himself defined tragedy thus: “the best tragedy highest tragedy …. Is that of the WORTHY encompassed by the INEVITABLE” [Personal Writings ed. Harold Orel, 1967].

Since the Elizabethan times, the role of women has changed slowly and gradually. In the Elizabethan times most people’s rights were fairly limited. There was no democracy, and most people had very little say in “national politics”, though on the parochial level, men and women could be elected to parish councils. What people did with their lives was much influenced by social class, degree of wealth education and gender. This trend continued till the nineteenth century, when men and women obtained significantly more rights, for instance, until 1833, in the UK, only a very small number of propertied men had the right to vote. But the franchise was extended to more men in
the course of the nineteenth century and to women in the early twentieth century. For women specifically, there were married women’s property acts which were passed in between the 1860s and 1880s. The divorce laws were changed so that a woman could obtain divorce from an adulterous or abusive spouse, and the Infant Custody Act gave women who were innocent parties in a divorce the right to have custody of young children. Women began entering the University in the 1860s, although, even for men, it was the privilege of the titled and rich minority.

In this world which was fast changing, Thomas Hardy can be viewed as the last lonely, representation of an ancient race. Endowed with Elizabethan imagination, he found himself – by Destiny – in an unknown world of the later nineteenth century. He did not find man to be a noble piece of nature but found him to be the late and transient product of some automatic principle of life, cast in a universe he knew nothing about and to whom he was nothing. He therefore, sought comfort in the imaginary world called Wessex, where men and women struggle to overcome the obstacles encountered in their journey through life and, happiness is but a brief episode in the general drama of life. In order to understand Hardy’s “Philosophy of Life” his treatment of the female characters and the ranging vision found in his poems, novels and short stories, we have to understand the historical era he belonged to – The Victorian Age. There were certain laws such as Marriage laws, Property laws and marriage settlement under the Equity Law, The Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 and The Matrimonial Causes Act, 1923, that adversely impacted the lives of women in the Victorian Age and into this world of strict social code, Hardy came into being. He lived in a time where marriage was the expected practice for young men and women. There are a number of injudicious, difficult, and failed marriages in Hardy’s work and some of these ideas are
seen in Hardy's portrayal of women in his short stories especially in *The Wessex Tales*. He was acutely aware of the social status of people, how village and town life was conducted, how men and women reacted to their own sex and to each other and the part religion and laws played in people's lives. When *Jude the Obscure* was published, it was viewed by many as the author’s contribution to the growing discussion about marriage. Hardy explained, however, that the matrimonial institution was important to the novel – since one of its themes has to do with marriage and its legal aspects – but only as a means, not an end, as is suggested by William R. Goetz. The author admitted, though, that he was very skeptical about marriage as the ultimate goal of happiness for two people in love, and in *Jude*, as Morgan argues, Hardy gives one last twist to the marriage-and-happy-ending denouement that he had always regarded as false and misleading.

Hardy’s personal philosophy on “the marriage question” – as it was often phrased, was progressive for his time. He felt that the institution of marriage damaged through “overregulation” what it sought to protect. He felt that it was absurd to force two people to vow to love each other forever and if that failed, the couple was socially required to stay together. Marriage, in Hardy’s fictional world, means unhappiness. Rarely is a married couple blessed with marital bliss. Perhaps, this accounts for the reluctance of the majority of Hardy’s heroines to marry. So many marriage licenses are cancelled and many are sought for at the spur of the moment. Moreover extra-marital affairs are quite common. His fictional world throngs with heart breakers as well as girls and women who are evasive, coquettish and enchanting. Divorce was not only expensive, but it went against the social mores of Victorian society as can be discerned
from the legislation incorporated then. Hardy was not so much against marriage as against the idea that it was an irrevocable contract.

Thomas Hardy resists socially accepted depiction of the female, with his radically independent heroines. He redefines the role of his women in his fiction by focusing on their sexuality. By emphasizing the physical aspect of femininity in his unorthodox representation of the sexual female, Hardy threatens the Victorian model of women. In an age that placed a high value on reticence, self-restraint and certain feminine qualities such as delicacy of health, a retiring disposition, physical and intellectual timidity, Hardy’s women with their admixture of qualities – transcending the stereotypes of Madonna and whore – must have confused many readers caught with conflicting feelings of admiration and alarm. Hardy was deeply opposed to the liberal feminist’s idealization of marriage. The lone anti-marriage campaigner, as embodied in Sue Bridehead arrives late on the scene in Hardy’s novels. Before Sue Bridehead, are dissident and rebellious characters, beautiful and enduring women like Bathsheba and Elfride. Bathsheba’s views on marriage, while more tentative than Sue’s, spring from a shared ideology and shared feminine consciousness which hotly denounces the notion that marriage should be the expressed goal of a woman’s sexuality. This consciousness is evident even in the women of Hardy’s shorter fiction. Hardy’s disruptive women evidently unsettle more worlds than their own, and he stands firmly behind them. From Elfride’s embattled sexual confrontations with Knight to Sue’s outrage at the notion that a married “woman” should be regarded as man’s property, Hardy’s platform remains consistent. Mid-to-late Victorian medical theorists held that all serious discussions of female sexuality should be properly confined to the medical journals, where, under the heading of pathological disorder, it would be addressed in terms of malfunction. It took
Hardy twenty years or so to openly declare himself, in *Tess*, as an opponent to such medical theories – an opponent of the prevailing sexual ethics and sexual double standards. In *Candour of English Fiction* (1890), Hardy argued against Victorian literary conventions and pointed out that there were only two courses open to him – either he produced in his characters, the spurious effect of their being in harmony with social forms and ordinances or, by leaving them alone to act as they will, he must bring down the thunders of respectability upon his head. His first heroine, Cytherea Graye, in *Desperate Remedies* is not drawn into any form of defiance. She is, on the contrary, a thoroughly orthodox creation, rare in the Hardyian world. *A Pair of Blue Eyes* initiates the long line of his unconventional, voluptuous heroines, the first of his so-called “misrepresentations” of womanhood. Elfride is not a stereotypical Victorian maiden awaiting self-definition through marriage – a man’s name, identity, status and economic standing. Her growth and maturity are attained through sexual development, exploration and an increasing awareness of her own psycho-sexual needs.

Again, in *The Return of the Native*, Hardy creates an unconventional woman struggling against the desires of passionate love and the independence of the male. Like the heath, Eustacia is untameable and even masculine. She is a wonderful combination of the strength of a man and the beauty of a woman. Her desire to be loved, not by one man but many, does not only defy the accepted moral codes but is in itself subversive. A similar conflict occurs in *Tess* probably Hardy’s most challenging rejection of the Victorian “dichotomy”, was to give his novel a subtitle – “A Pure Woman.” This subtitle caused a great scandal, for Tess, bears a child out of wedlock and as per the notion of “respectability”, in those days; she cannot be “pure”. But Hardy challenges this idea of purity and calls her “pure” on the basis of her moral integration. In her
defiance of the Victorian ideal, Tess gains her strength and empowerment but her passionate sexuality also results in isolation, and ultimately, her death. Strength and independence characterize, Hardy’s heroines and they are a clear departure from the ideal Victorian heroine, “the combination of sexuality and masculine qualities in Hardy’s passionate heroines exemplifies a new characterization of women.” Sue, offers another example, in *Jude the Obscure* – though not married to Jude, she lives with him and bears him children. This union, in conventional standards of morality, is condemned as “depraved.” But Sue, in actuality, is an extremely moral person, conscientious and even high minded. As readers, we are invited to examine all the evidence in this complex case, before rendering a verdict. Indeed, the moral police in Hardy’s time saw his treatment of sexual desire as sensational, scandalous, violent, pagan and even bestial. The use of explicit description of female desire and his sympathetic treatment of his heroines makes Hardy appear as subversive. His heroines are faced with a psychological struggle between enslavement to Victorian norms or freedom to lead an unshackled life.

The interpretation of Hardy’s texts by Havelock Ellis is of paramount importance, in the light of Sexology. This is a new genre of science which deals with psycho – sexual interpretation, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In 1893, Ellis placed Hardy’s fiction – because of its “minute observation,” its “delicate insight” and its “conception of love as the one business in Life” – in the feminine tradition of novel writing represented by authors such as Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte and George Elliot. Charles Dickens and William Thackeray, for example, whom Ellis invoked as contrasts to Hardy, did not confine their emphasis exclusively to the courtship plot, especially to the woman’s position in that plot. According to Havelock
Ellis, Hardy’s fiction differed from that of his female counterparts in the way in which his heroines are more “instinct-led” than concerned with moral questions.

One of the chief characteristics of Hardy’s work is the dominance of women characters. His deep sympathy for women, lies, in the emotional rendering of their suffering and struggle in society, passing through the transitional phase from conventionalism to modernity. D.H. Lawrence observes the 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 a society deeply entrenched in the concept of male superiority and female submissiveness.

A chronological study of Hardy’s novels from the point of view of his presentation of the major women characters and his attitudes to the issues concerning women and their emancipation reveals a steady growth in his outlook from a feminine to a feminist stance. The earlier novels, beginning with Desperate Remedies (1871), Under the Greenwood Tree (1872), A Pair of Blue Eyes (1873) and Far From the Madding Crowd (1874), to some extent deal with women characters portrayed in the light of accepted stereotypical models. But as Hardy advanced in his career, he grew more and more confident of his vision and less and less mindful of Victorian prudery. On account of his modern outlook Hardy thus remains, and will continue to remain, the focus of critical interest.

Chapter II: “The New Woman” – Feminist Readings of Hardy’s Fiction

In her essay “Thomas Hardy and Matters of Gender”, Kristin Brady states, “From their first publication, the works of Thomas Hardy have been explicitly and obsessively associated with matters of gender” (Brady,104). Indeed, in all his work –
fiction or poetry – gender related issues are powerfully and skillfully portrayed. To speak of gender, again, implicitly leads one to the issue concerning sexuality. Judith Butler says, “gender is the performance of sexuality within culture” (*Gender Trouble*, Preface, xii). It is essential therefore, to trace the shifting permutations of ideas of sexual difference in Hardy’s fiction. According to Elaine Showalter, “To a feminist critic, Hardy presents an irresistible paradox. He was one of the few male novelists, who wrote in what may be called a feminine tradition…” (Showalter, 99). The remarkable heroines of Hardy’s major novels and women of the shorter fiction, (for example Betty Dornell, Dame the First in *Noble Dames*) speak directly to the women readers. As early as 1878, in *The Return of the Native*, he spoke about the “Irrepressible New” and nothing can be more irrepressible than “The New Woman.” Spanning the course of six decades, the literary works of Thomas Hardy note the evolution of the New Woman. From the accepting and submissive Cythera Graye in his first book to the questioning and defiant Sue Bridehead in his last written novel, Hardy documented the growth of the independent woman, as well as, her struggles for acceptance and unconditional love. Though his heroines become stronger and more determined with each novel, Hardy maintains a consistency in their natures indicating an essentialist view. Through his fiction, Hardy offered his women a voice reflecting the anxiety and ambiguity of their changing role in society. One of his most successful heroines, Bathsheba Everdene, best articulates women’s difficulty in expressing themselves. In her effort to dissuade Farmer Boldwood from his marriage proposal as a business transaction in *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874), Bathsheba exclaims: “It is difficult for a woman to define her feelings in a language which is chiefly made by men to express theirs” (308). Similar to
Bathsheba’s determination to manage her farm as a single woman, the growth and development of the independent, expressive woman was a gradual process.

The modern era ushered in new ideas of technology and industry along with new perspectives on personal relationships. Perhaps, no “new” concept was more challenging than that of the New Woman. Promoted as a political agenda by women’s rights advocate and novelist Sarah Grand in 1894, “The New Woman” was a phrase used to describe a woman who stood socially, politically and educationally equal to men. It was a term that caused much concern and debate in both England and the United States, in the late nineteenth century. The term “New Woman” was coined by the writer and public speaker Sarah Grand in 1894 (The New Woman as an Imperialist Feminist, 271). It soon became a popular catch–phrase in newspapers and books. The New Woman, a significant cultural icon of the fin de siècle, departed from the stereotypical Victorian woman. She was intelligent, educated emancipated, independent and self-supporting. Though she addressed the double standards prevalent in the society with regards to moral codes, she upheld the responsibility of women to raise healthy children who would serve their country and the British Empire. Motherhood, it must be observed, is an important topic in Hardy’s fiction as well, and most of his heroines are future mothers or would have been if they had survived an oppressive social environment. Bathsheba (FMC), Betty Dornell (Noble Dames), Lizzy (Wessex Tales) are few strong women characters of Hardy’s fiction that lived to find happiness in marriage. Hardy steered clear of political involvement and the feminist activists, Grand aligned women’s duties with national responsibility, undermining much of her feminist ideals. Unlike Grand, Hardy had no feminist agenda, only a respect for strong women and disgust for a world that suppressed their individuality. He seldom mentions political
or national identity in any of his works and though his stories are set against rural England he never propagated the Empire.

Of all the British novelists of the twentieth century D.H. Lawrence inherited much of his passionate imagination from Thomas Hardy. Lawrence’s sensual writing is directly derived from Hardy’s vivid descriptions of women and landscape. Lawrence himself acknowledges in *The Study of Hardy* (1914), his longest and most serious work of criticism, that Hardy was his master and the principal influence. He wrote several essays on Hardy and was an admirer and staunch defender of his fiction. Lawrence was also the first to point to the dichotomy between instinct and intellect in Hardy’s fiction. He considered Hardy to be a “modern” writer because he believed that Hardy’s vision of life did not belong to the nineteenth century for Hardy created a modern metaphysics which reflected his awareness of the tragedy of human existence. In addition, Lawrence saw Hardy’s fiction as a valuable interpretation of sexuality. In his *Study of Thomas Hardy*, Lawrence continued some of Hardy’s favorite themes: the dichotomy between nature and civilization, “flesh and spirit,” emphasizing the duality of human existence. Endorsing Hardy’s negative analysis of modernity, he also investigated the unconscious mind and sexuality of both men and women.

Hardy’s views of contemporary fiction as a new form of tragedy contributes to the structure, tone and narrative technique of the stories in *Life’s Little Ironies* (1894), in which small episodes are seen as tragic and in which social conventions play a major role in working out the destiny of the characters. This does not imply that Hardy’s stories are deterministic, but rather to point out that whereas in classical and Shakespearean tragedy character is the main mover of the tragic action, here the catastrophe is reached by the dramatic interaction of persons and society, of character
and environment. Hardy had written in his Notebook in 1889: “That which socially, is a great tragedy, may be in Nature no alarming circumstance” (EL, 286). Whether directly or indirectly, the general themes of all the stories in Life’s Little Ironies involve the failure of marriage as an institution for formalizing and stabilizing sexual relationships and the destructive effects of social ambition on family life. In most of the stories, these concerns are merged.

Hardy is recognized as an accomplished and compelling short fiction writer and in some ways these stories are superior to his novels. Largely on account of their narrower focus and lack of digression. The shorter fiction of Hardy is a product of its time slotted into a cultural matrix that can never be recreated. Wessex Tales reflects in its narrative details the social, economic and cultural diversity of Dorset life. Although “pastoral” (Brady) in setting, these tales allow the reader to re-examine the “life-process” of his own time in terms of the universals that unite Wessex and the present. “The Three Strangers” with a pastoral setting in history, subject matter and narrative points of view - is a fitting introduction to Wessex Tales. Set against the universal conflict between man and nature is that between Shepherd Fennel’s generosity and his wife’s frugality, and – more fundamentally – that between the rural man’s sense of justice and the urban man’s sense of law.

As his contemporary biographer, H.C. Duffin noted in 1937, it is not Hardy who treats his women cruelly, but life as Hardy saw it. What Hardy could do for women he did – he made them full of beauty, interest, fascinating and lovable qualities of all kinds, he gave them great parts to play, and let them (generally) play those parts well. His estimate of woman is high, but tempered and conditioned by keen observation of the realities round him… Hardy is no misogynist, but a true lover in very deed (238). A
more recent biographer, writing at the onset of the Women’s Rights Movement during the Civil Rights era on 1967, Irving Howe, shared Duffin’s view on Hardy. He observes, that Hardy was endowed with a precious gift: “he liked women” (108). Howe asserted that it was Hardy’s affection for women that made him an early feminist. Feminist critics in the 1970s cited the works of Thomas Hardy in support of women’s emancipation. Mary Jacobus attributed Hardy’s “compassionate identification with his heroine with an authorial allegiance to a living, breathing, sentient woman [which] evades external standards of judgement” (321). Jacobus added [on Tess] that Hardy does not attempt to portray Tess as being far more than what she is; he does not idealize her, but rather, he humanizes her not hesitating to portray her as having feelings of intensity leading to passion and murder. Tess is not to be criticized for her needs but rather her needs should be recognized as natural, and Hardy presents her with clarity and without judgement. Jacobus also made a similar observation about his depiction of Sue: “Hardy is imaginatively generous towards both sides of the struggle but as always, his most intense feeling is for the loser…Sue’s tormented consciousness haunts us more than Jude’s bitter oblivion” (324). Feeling most intensely for the “loser” might place Hardy as an advocate for women in the Women’s Rights Movement, both in his time and in the Civil Rights Era of the twentieth century. The radically differing assessments of Women’s Studies regarding Hardy’s writing demonstrate the paradoxes of a man who seemed strangely aloof yet keenly aware of societal expectations and women’s struggles to align their roles with their natures, at the end of the Victorian era. Perhaps earlier feminists were encouraged by any indication of an author’s sympathy to women, while more modern feminists are not satisfied with anything less than complete and total empowerment for women. These extreme views of Hardy’s work, spanning the
course of more than a century, reflect the ambiguities of the author himself. He has been called misogynist as well as advocate for women, a constant commentary that is reflective of the title of Claire Tomalin’s biography of Hardy – *The Time Torn Man*. A self-described meliorist, Hardy was also an artist, craftsmen, naturalist, evolutionist, essentialist, a man who loved women as much as he seemingly feared them. He lived in the time of Flux and was exposed to many new ideas that he combined with his own life experiences and personal outlook to form a vision of how things should and would be.

**Chapter III: Matters of Gender in Wessex Tales and A Group of Noble Dames**

Hardy’s texts, it has been observed, like women and dislike them, they depict both pleasure and pain, both arousal and anxiety, (Brady, 104). No one has created more attractive women of a certain class, women whom a man would be more likely to love or to regret loving.

The *Wessex Tales* was Hardy’s first collection of short stories and the stories reflect the experience of a novelist at the height of his powers. Each of these stories has its origin in the village anecdotes but on closer examination, each deals with a situations involving love which is vitiated by life’s ironies and perils and circumstance. The narratives reveal a keen psychological analysis of female behaviour within the framework of social conditioning.

Sally Hall, the heroine of “Interlopers at the Knap” reinforces Hardy’s claim in *Desperate Remedies* – “woman is not undeveloped man.” Sally embodies the spirit of the “New Woman” and belongs more to the new age than to nineteenth century Britain. She possesses ineffable charm, high spirits, intelligence, perceptiveness and the independence of a woman who dares to say “No” to the accepted social condition called matrimony.
In “The Melancholy Hussar of the German Legion” Hardy’s compassionate treatment of Phyllis Grove, the hapless heroine reveals the author’s keen interest in the limitations that class, nationality and language place upon a woman of the nineteenth century Britain. Phyllis Grove courted humility and modesty till she died “with the unfortunate result of inflicting an injustice upon her memory” (29).

“The Distracted Preacher,” though a comic tale, addresses the problems faced by a woman like Lizzy Newberry nee Lizzy Simpkins, in coming to terms with her dual personality and life. Described as “a widow – woman,” she is the “irrepressible new” woman, a delightful creature reminiscent of Bathsheba, Herminia and other kindred Hardyian heroines. The tale, thus, becomes an exploration of a woman torn between conventionality and the radical possibility of exerting independence by pushing against the limits set by a male dominated society.

* A Group of Noble Dames* (1891), another collection of short stories portray the lives of ten Women as narrated by members of a Wessex Field and Antiquarian club, who are ensconced at an inn after a rainstorm delayed their outing Thomas Hardy described the contents of *A Group of Noble Dames* as “I may say it is to be a Tale of Tales – a series of linked stories – of a somewhat different kind from the mass of my work of late” (Letters VII, 113).

In his Preface, dated June 1896, Hardy also elucidates that the narratives contained in this collection have been derived from “the diagrams on pages of county histories” of the “pedigrees of country families.” By transforming “this dryness as of dust” into a palpitating drama through a careful comparison of dates alone, the frame work of the motives, passions and personal qualities of these extraordinary Dames, most of the stories have “arisen and taken shape.” These “curious tales of fair dames, of their
loves and hates, their joys and misfortunes, their beauty and their fate” offer a rich quarry for a study of the gender matrix in Hardy’s shorter fiction.

Dame the First, “The First Countess of Wessex” is a tale narrated by the local historian. The dame, Betty Dornell, was married off at the tender age of twelve, in a little White Frock, which was carefully preserved at King’s Hintock Court as “a testimony to the small count taken of the happiness of an innocent child in the social strategy of those days, which might have led, but providentially did not lead, to great unhappiness” (Noble Dames, 9).

Dame the Second, “Barbara of the House of Grebe,” is narrated by the old surgeon. These two stories (The First Countess of Wessex and Barbara) form a natural contrast; in the first, a young girl is not allowed to marry a man of her choice but eventually finds happiness with the husband her mother had arranged for her, whereas in “Barbara”, the heroine does marry her chosen one but finally ends up with the husband of her family’s choice and finds “only a very ambiguous love” (Ray, 95).

Dame the Third, “The Marchioness of Stonehenge” is a story which “afforded an instance of the latter and better kind of feeling, his heroine being also a lady who had married beneath her” (113). So rigid were the social prejudices and social divisions in those days, as pointed out earlier, that to dare to love below one’s status was tantamount to a blatant violation of the law of the land. Hardy’s deep understanding of the predicament of his female characters is acutely felt in each line of his tale.

Dame the Fourth, “Lady Mottisfont” is another tale juxtaposed with the previous “to make a pair of tales about unwanted children which reach opposing conclusions about the endurance of adoptive love” (Ray, 109). The female characters seem at first to fall into stereotyped moulds and to correspond in type to Milly and Lady Caroline.
Philippa, the gentle daughter of plain Squire Okehall, “is an amiable girl willing in her simplicity to love another woman’s child as her own.” The Italian Countess is a woman of great beauty and accomplishment who has given up her child for the sake of convention, but who still longs for the offspring of her passion. It appears at first sight that, as in “The Marchioness of Stonehenge” the adoptive mother has a more durable affection than the natural mother, but the two stories finally refute each other. The very moral which the preceding story had so dramatically pointed is contradicted by “Lady Mottisfont” in which parental affection is seen as a selfish need easily gratified by replacement (Brady).

“The Lady Icenway,” Dame the Fifth in the earlier edition, is a tale “about a woman hoping to use her bigamous first husband to produce a fake heir for her second.” But, according to Martin Ray, Hardy edits the end of the story to turn it into a “sentimental story about a woman wishing that she had stayed free to re-marry her first husband.” Both Martin Ray and Kristen Brady have identified the problem faced by a woman like Maria Icenway, who, is struggling to adhere to the conventions of her time. The production of a “Lineal successor” being the sole aim of the institution of marriage at that time, failure to do so usually resulted in embittered and long drawn legal battles over property and title rights. Maria’s acute consciousness of her insulated social position, power and convention, dominates her actions throughout the narrative and debilitates, any capacity in her for warm, natural affection. She is, we can say, a typical product of her times.

“Squire Petrick’s Lady” is not directly concerned with an aristocratic or upper-class family as are the other stories in A Group of Noble Dames. Narrated by the Crimson Maltster, it opens with an apology for his heroine’s lack of title, “it never
having being his good fortune to know many of the nobility” (171-172). But the Malster’s apology is not Hardy’s, for the story is important precisely because its characters are not noble. Appropriately located at the centre of the volume, it portrays the extent to which the common man can be corrupted by the romantic illusion he has of his social betters, the aristocracy. For both the noble man and the commoner this illusion is destructive because their victims are children born into a society which confuses their lineage with their humanity.

Dame the Seventh, “Anna Lady Baxby” is a departure from the earlier stories in that the issues addressed here are not about childhood but of loyalty to family, spouse and country.

“The Lady Penelope,” Dame the Eighth, narrates the tragic life of a beautiful lady who “had been done to death by a vile scandal that was wholly unfounded” (209). She is described as “a lady of noble family and extraordinary beauty” (196) and that “her beauty was so perfect, and her manner so entrancing, that suitors seemed to spring out of the ground” (197). Due to her highly visible position in society she could never transcend the natural mistakes of her adolescence, her only fault being the “unseemly wantonness” and precipitancy that characterize youth. Her famous roguish quip – “have patience you foolish men! Only bide your time quietly, and, in faith I will marry you all in turn” (198) – to three gallant suitors, Sir John Gale, Sir William Henry and Sir George Drenghard, with gossip and communal elaboration, ominously, began to shape her life and fulfill itself as a prophecy.

“The Duchess of Hamptonshire,” Dame the Ninth, re-examines the questions raised in the first two stories of Noble Dames like Betty Dornell and Barbara Grebe, Emmeline – a girl of “sweet and simple nature” – is forced into marriage by a parent
who places wealth and social prestige over affection and sexual passion. But Emmeline’s story differs in that the two suitors in her life fail to fulfill her sexual and emotional needs.

“The Honourable Laura” published in 1881, is a fitting last story for *A Group of Noble Dames* because of its happy marriage achieved after years of penitential suffering. This optimistic conclusion parallels the ending of “The First Countess of Wessex.” It also represents references to tricycles and railway stations making the story “more modern in [its] date of action” (206) than the previous narratives.

In *Wessex Tales* and *A Group of Noble Dames*, Hardy presents a picture gallery of hauntingly beautiful women, whose very essence is highlighted by a masterstroke of their creator. Painted with a profusion of colours, bold mixed with darker shades, Hardy’s portraits depict the nature of woman in all her glory and shame, boldness and timidity, arrogance and humility, rebellion and submission and her misery and happiness. In the *Wessex Tales* we meet Phyllis Grove, the image of a simple woman, suppressed by a tyrannical father and whose seclusion and isolation leads to an inability to chart out her own destiny; in Lucy, we see, a confidential, quiet woman whose firm moral stance (the rejection of the attentions of her remorseful but married former lover) elevates her to a moral position higher than that of her male counterpart, Barnet; Sally is a symbol of the power of the New Woman to say “No” to matrimony and go on to lead a fulfilling life as a single woman; and Lizzy, with her high spirits, loyalty to her lineage, strength, boldness and resourcefulness becomes Hardy’s valediction of the essential qualities of a woman and foreshadows the heroines of his major novels – Bathsheba, Eustacia, Tess and Sue Bridehead. In *A Group of Noble Dames* we encounter the rebellious, lovable Betty Dornell; the timid, emotionally immature
Barbara; Lady Carolina, a woman torn between sexual love and conventional ambitions; the delightful symbol of motherhood, Milly; the insensitive ability to replace an adoptive child by her own, in Lady Mottisfont; the delusions of the Squire’s lady leading to a serious questioning of the common man’s adulation of the aristocracy at the cost of natural affection for one’s own child; loyalty to family, spouse and country is seen in Anna Braxby; the tragedy in Lady Penelope’s life caused by lies and gossip; the suffering of Lady Emmeline at the hands of a cruel husband and a fastidious lover; and finally, the maturity attained by Laura after years of suffering. In all these women, we behold the sympathy, keen insight and sensitivity of a male author, – uncommon in the Victorian period – whose concern with gender matters establishes him as a writer in the feminine tradition.

In these collections of short stories, Hardy examines the relationships between the sexes and reveals that they are not only marred by sexual jealousies and rivalries, class differences and economic disparities but also by the various gender based constructs and ideologies of a patriarchal society. In this manner the basic structure of these stories incorporates in itself some of the polemic elements that highlight the weaknesses of such narrow beliefs and concepts. Closely associated with the subject of love and relationships are the issues of marriage, sex and divorce which Hardy dwells upon more emphatically in the Noble Dames stories than in Wessex Tales. In this collection, Noble Dames, Hardy presents the less happy underside of upper-class life. He focuses on the women and the injurious effect upon them of the clash between convention and sexual passion. They are the victims of social rules and norms, of men and at times their own social prejudices. Each noble dame tries to make a marriage that will allow for the fulfillment of her desires and affections within the framework of a
society that emphasizes education, social establishment, title, wealth as fundamental attributes in a spouse. Thus, differences in class lead to tension in the lives of the characters – with the capacity to both attract and repel the lovers. Class pressures account for the extent and diversity of unhappiness and tragedy, possible in a society that cherishes birth above human qualities. And, the victims of these conventional practices and ideals, are women and children. The importance placed on legitimacy over illegitimacy, male over female causes for either acceptance or rejection of children in this rigid system of inheritance.

Therefore these short stories depict the influence of conventions and norms, followed by the patriarchal society in Victorian England, and how they affect gender roles and matters of gender. Both Wessex Tales and A Group of Noble Dames reaffirm and project Hardy’s concern as a writer – the principle of life itself, with all its complexities, heartaches, and hope.

**Chapter IV: Life’s Little Ironies and A Changed Man and Other Tales: An Exploration of Gender and Identity**

Hardy, as we have seen, is concerned with the principle of life itself and “in many of the sentiments in life the difference of sex is but a difference of degree” (DR). Life’s Little Ironies (1874) reinforces the author’s statement quoted above. “An Imaginative Woman,” “On the Western Circuit,” “The Son’s Veto,” “For Conscience’s Sake,” “A Tragedy of Two Ambitions,” are brilliant tales locating on creative expression, sexuality and human frailties. Life’s Little Ironies at once departs from and develops the subject matter and technique of Hardy’s earlier stories. While Wessex Tales and A Group of Noble Dames are historical and rural, these stories take place in an unspecified present. In A Group of Noble Dames social conventions play an
important part in the formation of character and in the development of the action but in *Life’s Little Ironies* there is a shift to an explicit concern with contemporary problems, which reveals, Hardy’s tendency at the end of his fiction writing career to question outspokenly on both the social conventions of his time and the literary conventions created and supported by them. The entries in Hardy’s notebook, between 1888 and 1894, the period when the stories were written, express his vexation at the rigidity of “social conventions and contrivances – the artificial forms of living” (*EL*, 279). The central issue in his mind, *The Woodlanders* and *Jude the Obscure* reveal, was the failure of marriage to solve what he called “the immortal puzzle – given the man and woman, how to find a basis for the sexual relation” (*TW*, vii). In a note of April, 1891, he expresses sympathy for women:

> A community of women, especially young women, inspires not reverence but protective tenderness in the breast of one who views them. Their belief in circumstances, in convention, in the rightness of things, which you know to be not only wrong but damnably wrong, makes the heart ache, even when they are waspish and hard (*EL*, 308).

In 1893, he reported a conversation at Lady Londonderry’s about the difficulties of separation, of terminable marriages when there are children and of the nervous strain of living with a man when you know he can throw you over at any moment (*LY*, 23). Again, in 1894, he wrote a brief article for the *New Review* containing his advice on how to prepare one’s daughters for marriage and when to question “whether marriage, as we at present understand it, is such a desirable goal for all women as it is assumed to be.” To Hardy’s mind, the proper subject of literature was a frank treatment of “the position of man and woman in nature”. He defended the conclusion of *Tess* by saying, that, “the optimistic ‘living happy ever after’ always raises in me a great horror by its
ghastly unreality than the honest sadness that comes of a logical and inevitable tragedy” (Blathwayt, 238).

“An Imaginative Woman,” sets the keynote for Hardy’s conception of the volume as a whole. “Its subject is the failure of the nineteenth century middle-class marriage, its theme the futility of imagining that life will conform to private dreams” (Brady, 98). According to Norman Page, this story had a special place in Hardy’s affections because of its association with Florence Henniker; in fact, Hardy considered it “the best piece of prose fiction I ever wrote” (Peirce, 194).

“The Son’s Veto” again focuses on a woman whose marriage has insufficiently satisfied her emotional needs and has an unconventionally unhappy ending, but in subject and tone, it is a striking contrast to “An Imaginative Woman.” Ella Marchmill evades and at the same time creates her predicament by forming an imaginary world for herself, while Sophy Twycott is free of self-absorption but suffers from a lack of self-esteem that prevents her acting, as naturally and morally as she should for her own happiness. Moreover, while Ella’s child is an innocent victim, Sophy’s son is the guilty perpetrator of her lonely isolation.

“Love is one of the great facts that mould human life. But it is a catastrophe,” says Virginia Woolf with regard to the novels of Thomas Hardy. Love, marriage and sex are the three main concerns of Thomas Hardy as a novelist. He firmly believed that the man-woman relationship had to be re-defined in the social context and taken up and treated frankly. In “On the Western Circuit,” we have a more daring and explicit exploration of a woman’s sexuality, in open defiance to the norms and conventions of Victorian England. This short story questions the popular belief and accepted norm that a woman was defined only by her adherence to submission and resistance to sexuality,
and places the woman who dared to “feel” on the same pedestal as Bathsheba (*FMC*), Eustacia Vye (*RN*), Tess (*T*) and Sue Bridehead (*J*).

Hardy wrote “A Tragedy of Two Ambitions,” in the summer of 1888, in Dorchester, just before beginning work on *Tess*. In this short story, Hardy explores the tragedy latent in the lives of those who seek to improve their social status by the “science of climbing” (*EL*, 70). A major theme here as in *Jude* is “the tragedy of unfulfilled aims” (*Jude* viii). According to Kristin Brady, “For Conscience’s Sake” [is] a story that undermines “one of the most sacrosanct of Victorian tenets, the duty of a man to marry the woman he has wronged” (109). The plot has a source in a story Hardy heard, in 1882, about a woman who refused to be “made respectable” by the lover who earlier had “betrayed and deserted her” (*EL*). *Early Life* reports that “the eminently modern idea embodied in this example – of a woman not becoming necessarily the chattel and slave of her seducer – impressed Hardy as being one of the first glimpses of woman’s enfranchisement.”

“*To Please His Wife*” was written in late 1890 or early 1891. This story refocuses on the theme of social ambition and feminine sexual envy. It goes on to prove that both lead to the suppression of the fundamental impulse of happiness and well-being.

Directly or indirectly, the general theme of all the stories in *Life’s Little Ironies* involve the failure of modern marriage as an institution, for formalizing and stabilizing sexual relationships and the insidious effects of social ambition on family life. But the tales are not didactic, trying to inspire a reform of the marriage law but rather, they are “an impassioned depiction of man’s inevitable failure to impose order upon the chaos of being” (Brady, 97).
“The Sketches” of *A Few Crusted Characters* are a fitting conclusion to the whole volume of Tales in *Life’s Little Ironies*. They are “life’s little ironies writ smaller” (Brady, 152). Both sections – the Tales and the Sketches – deal with fundamental human problems, for example, deception in love is the theme both of “On the Western Circuit,” and “Tony Kytes,” clerical hypocrisy of “A Son’s Veto” and “The Parson and the Clerk,” the irrational side of sexual instinct allures Car’line Aspent and The Hardcomes alike from domestic happiness. These sketches are narrated by different travelers in Burthen’s wagon depending on their accessibility to the original events. Only two stories will be taken up for study, “Tony Kytes, the Arch Deceiver” and “The History of the Hardcomes,” on the basis of relevance to the topic posited in the title of this thesis.

“Tony Kytes, the Arch Deceiver” is a sketch of entangled love relations. The characters are presented as comic stereotypes – Tony, Hannah, Unity, Milly and the intrusive father: Tony Kyte’s predicament springs from the universal problem of making choices – especially, when there are pretty girls to choose from, each as appealing as the other. In a farcical fore – shortening of the conventional courtship – Tony had to choose his bride all in one day, in one journey on his wagon. So, he flirted and deceived each one of them by turn. It is ironical that the one he ended up marrying was not his first choice at all. Tony had to awaken to the reality of courtship and the irreversible fact, that marriage is based on limitation and compromise.

“The History of the Hardcomes” presents a situation where an individual lured by irrational sexual instinct loses marital bliss. The fickle-mindedness of Tony Kytes had affected two engaged couples who had attended his “wedding randy.” This story, thus, takes a sober look at marriage and the consequences of whimsical choice.
“Life’s Little Ironies” and “A Few Crusted Characters” are unified in the same volume into a thematic whole because they treat the same fundamental human problems – love, marriage, ambition, sexuality and other intricacies of human life. All these stories reveal Hardy’s preoccupation and sympathy for an individual’s struggle against the norms and conventions existing at that time. The struggle was not only external but on many occasions came from within a person. The tragedy emerges not only because people are repressed from outside by conventions but because they themselves have been conditioned by their environment and social expectations to such an extent that they have succeeded in internalizing artificial social laws.

When Life’s Little Ironies was published in 1894, Hardy had almost reached the end of his fiction-writing career. After the appearance of Jude the Obscure in 1895, he composed five short stories – “A Committee Man of The Terror” (1896), “The Duke’s Reappearance” (1896), “The Grave by the Handpost” (1897), “Enter A Dragoon” (1900) and “A Changed Man” (1900). These along with “Master John Horseleigh Knight” and six short stories which had appeared in periodicals before 1891 were collected for Hardy’s last short story volume published in 1913. Although the short stories included in A Changed Man, lack any unifying thematic principle, they are valuable of insights life itself.

“A Changed Man,” which in Hardy’s opinion is the best of the Tales, was the author’s last short story and has a traditional, even historical, basis in the 1854 cholera epidemic in Fordington Parish, when the Reverend Henry Moule became a local and indeed a national hero for his unflagging efforts to control the spread of the disease. Despite its traditional content, this tale has more of “Life’s Little Ironies” than a
“Wessex Tale.” It raises questions about marriage, fidelity and social responsibility, and, then renders them insignificant in the face of human suffering.

“The Waiting Supper” was written during a period when Hardy was working on “The Withered Arm,” “The Melancholy Hussar” and “A Tragedy of Two Ambitions.” According to Kristin Brady, “The Waiting Supper” in its setting is a “Wessex Tale,” in its plot it is “Life’s Little Ironies” and in its comments on “chronicled families” and its emphasis on the destruction of class consciousness it has affinities with the “Noble Dames” stories. The fact that Hardy made quite a major and thorough revision of the periodical version of “The Waiting Supper” when he was preparing it for the Collection in 1913, makes it a “newer story, more reflective of his outlook in 1913, this short story’s recurrent pattern of evasion and delay is part of its concern with class prejudices and the negating influence such principles have on the man-woman relationship and suggesting his regard for it at that time” (Ray, 273).

“Alicia’s Diary,” Hardy’s only attempt in this form of narrative, was first collected in A Changed Man. Hardy pursues, in this story, the same theme of deceit in love found in “On the Western Circuit.” “Alicia’s Diary” is a steady unraveling of a woman’s mind – one in whose solitary existence and relative lack of society create an almost obsessive possessiveness about her younger sister. Beneath her professed love for her sister lay undertones of sexual envy and jealousy. The story possesses an ironic theme that, however, lacks the profundity achieved by Hardy in Life’s Little Ironies.

“Enter the Dragoon” was completed in early 1900 at about the same time as “A Changed Man” and they were the last two stories which Hardy wrote. This short story revolves around the failure of new love to thrive because of the blighting return of the old. In its structure and its treatment of social themes, “Enter a Dragoon,” is like a
“Life’s Little Irony.” The dramatic opposition in this story, frequent in Hardy’s work, lies in the presence of two suitors, one a familiar inhabitant of the area, and the other glamorous and romantic because he was an outsider. Selina’s “odd” predicament was brought upon herself by her quest for respectability and, in doing so, she exposed the Victorian attitude towards sex and marriage.

“A Mere Interlude,” published in the same year as “Tryst” prefigures some of the situations and themes of the Noble Dames and Life’s Little Ironies stories. Like the dames Baptista Trewethen is a common woman who finds herself in uncommon circumstances and as in “An Imaginative Woman,” “The Son’s Veto” and “On the Western Circuit,” the central concern of the story is the difficult position of a woman forced into marriage by social and economic pressures. Hardy delineates, in this story, the unpredictability of life where sudden deaths present new moral dilemmas and effect a change in a character’s sexual and marital alternatives.

Life’s Little Ironies and A Changed Man reveal both thematically and individually, to be the artistic product of an author whose vision of life is unique and consistent throughout his work. Hardy’s love and sympathy for his women characters, unfalteringly identifies that the existing social conventions, manners and expectations are at the root of their tragedy and misery. The themes explored in these stories – love, marriage, ambition – strike at the core of gender problems in Victorian England. In her struggle for equality and gender identity, a woman will encounter resistance and rejection by a patriarchal system that refuses to accept her as a complete, social and sexual being. Suppression and subordination has succeeded, for years, to marginalise a woman by assigning her domestic roles and discouraging any attempt to deviate from the encoded pattern. But, Hardy understands only too well, the potential inherent in a
woman and allows her through these stories to voice her desires, her aspirations, her pain and her fight for emancipation. A woman’s sexuality and the failure of marriage as an institution is explored in “An Imaginative Woman” and “On the Western Circuit”. The damaging effect of insidious ambition is depicted in “The Son’s Veto,” “A Tragedy of Two Ambitions” and “To Please His Wife.” These tales emphasize the negative capacity of conventions and social aspirations, to destroy an individual’s impulse for happiness. Hardy’s contribution to the Women’s cause lies not only in the radicalism of his themes and thought but also in his portrayal of bold, resourceful, strong independent women. Although, Ella Marchmill, Edith Harnham, Sophy Twycott, Edith Horseleigh, ultimately surrender to the power of conventional society, they shine, if ever so briefly, among the grand pantheon of heroines found in Hardy’s longer fiction. These stories will always be revisited for their faithfulness to life and for unearthing the beauty beneath the tragedy of suffering human beings – due to life’s little ironies.

**Chapter V: Conclusion**

Thomas Hardy is often maligned by feminist readers for his portrayal of women who are punished for their refusal to submit to the patriarchal law. However, far from reasserting anti-feminist notions of women and womanhood, Hardy uses his heroines to challenge the patriarchal structuring of a society that does not recognize women’s words, women’s passions or women’s possibilities. Bathsheba, Betty Dornell (*Noble Dames*), Sally and Lizzy (*Wessex Tales*) and Leonora (*Life’s Little Ironies*) are some of Hardy’s heroines, who confront the issues of language, sexuality and marriage from a feminist perspective, and force the reader to recognize the artificiality of the systems which uphold man as the centre of a society in which a woman is “the other”. Within *Far From the Madding Crowd, Tess of the D’Urbervilles, Jude the Obscure, Wessex
Tales, A Group of Noble Dames and Life’s Little Ironies, subversive voices speak up against the stereotypes within which women are contained and break down the “letter” of patriarchal laws which artificially characterize women as “sexless” and needy of a husband and his blanket of financial security. The heroines of these texts speak out against the sexist language, the stereotype of the “pure woman” and the necessity of marriage. Although they are eventually silenced, their voices have been heard and the reader must recognize their right to speak and to live independent of patriarchal laws.

Feminist criticism appeared as a critical theory in Literature in the late 1960s. Its objective was to describe and interpret women’s experience by eroding various misconceptions regarding traditional images and conventional roles of women. It aimed at re-reading texts to determine the extent to which they reveal a feminist consciousness. It assisted women writers to recognize their potential and find their position in the field of literature by relating to each other through a subculture. Kate Millet’s book Sexual Politics (1969) advocated the need to challenge the traditional author/reader relation where the reader grasped the text as a passive being. Sexual Politics along with Thinking about Women (1968) by Mary Ellman encouraged the “Images of women” line of criticism. This is a reaction against the incorrect representation of women through false images or female stereotypes. Cheri Register, another feminist critic put forward a demand for strong, independent, self reliant but authentic women who can act as role models for women in actual life. These critics objected to the female polarization of goddess or whore, angel or demon that served the purpose of patriarchy. They also dismissed patriarchal mythologies of romantic love and of motherhood, viewing both as hampering the growth of women as individuals. They aimed at locating instances of misogyny and misrepresentation of women.
From 1975 onwards, the critical attention shifted from “feminist critique” to gyno-criticism that is, from the works of male writers to those of female writers. It was proposed to discover a history of tradition among women writers based upon their common experience both inside and outside the literary fields. Ellen Moer’s *Literary Women* (1976), Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of their Own* (1977) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979) appeared as major studies in this context.

Divergence in the feminist criticism can be traced in the form of relativist and essentialists positions held by feminists. Relativists who are generally Anglo-Americans view that there is no difference between men and women’s writing. According to them, the specific concerns of the white middle class heterosexual women writers represent the narrative of all women. The essentialist position held by French feminists on the contrary, highlights the difference between men and women as well as within women themselves based on class linguistically “woman” is a sign not an essence. They emphasize the difference between the signifier and signified.

Deconstructionists or Post - Structuralists feminists aim to deconstruct the centre or the masculine construction of reality in the conceptual system of language. Deconstructionist or Post - Structuralists criticism holds a special relevance to Hardy’s texts. The general trend of the critics in the past had been to judge Hardy’s fiction by traditional canon of realism. They praised Hardy as a tragic humanist-realist of Wessex. The contradictions, the interplay of various voices within Hardy’s narrative were almost ignored. Post - Structuralists or Post - Modernists, however, could locate fissures in the textuality of Hardy’s fiction. In his 1895 Preface to the first edition of *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy mentioned that his novels are a “series of seemings” or “personal impressions”.
The Post-modernists approach also rejects the claims of those critics who declare Hardy as “anti – feminist” or a misogynist. These critics ignore the simultaneous presentation of Hardy whose sensibility or consciousness was moulded to a certain degree by the feminist uproar of the times.

During this time, Hardy, along with other major writers, such as, H.G. Wells, Gissing and Meredith made pioneering efforts to do away with the “insuperable bar” held by the English society on fiction. He aimed to break down the existing sexual taboos and presented his themes on love, marriage and sexuality with frankness. He condemned the double sexual morality endorsed by the prevalent ideology and criticized both marriage and the divorce laws which favoured men. The polemic elements in Hardy’s writing resulted in a volley of accusations and condemnation by the public, but that was the price he had to pay for challenging the patriarchal conventions and ideology. As Merryn Williams observes, in A Preface to Hardy (1976), “Hardy is called a Victorian because he lived most of his life in the nineteenth century, and it was the century which formed many of his beliefs and ideas” (Williams, 61). But, he was not, a typical Victorian. He for one, found it difficult to accept some of the most cherished beliefs of the period, such as Providence, and he seemed to possess a more modern and questioning attitude which only came to literature around the turn of the century. Writing towards the end of the nineteenth century, Hardy appeared to be ahead of his time in several aspects, especially in anticipating the breakdown of the laws regarding sexual identity. His strong, independent and passionate women characters, therefore, excited severe criticism from conservative readers because they were unprepared for his vision of the changing role of women. Dale Kramer notes that despite the fact that Hardy was greatly admired by many of his contemporary readers
for his forthrightness, he personally only seemed to listen to those who criticized his work (Kramer, 179). As a result, disturbed by the public outcry against the unconventional subjects of *Tess* and *Jude*, Hardy announced in 1896 that he had given up fiction and turned to poetry.

According to John Peck there is a long, traceable path of rebels in Hardy’s fiction; characters who seem to collide with the world and are at odds with society. He also notes that the majority of Hardy’s characters are rebels, not willfully so, but there is simply something in their nature that makes it impossible for them to fit in (Peck, 3). However, Hardy never condemns his character’s inability to conform, on the contrary, he takes their side and blames their actions on the rigidity of the contemporary conventions. This pattern of rebellious behaviour, which is more modern than Victorian, is found not just in *Tess*, and *Jude* but to a lesser degree also in his short stories, such as *A Group of Noble Dames*, *Wessex Tales* and *Life’s Little Ironies*. Betty Dornell’s reckless elopement, Sally’s choice of single womanhood, Lizzy’s liquor smuggling ring are a few examples of new and refreshing unconventional rebels in Hardy’s fiction.

Hardy does not accept that biological gender differences somehow enable men to be active, speaking, owning, travelling, working members of society, or that women must be passive, silent, submissive, self-abnegating, idle victims of men’s whims. He continually surprises his readers with insights into the trials women must face in a patriarchal society, attacking a language that labels women from outside of themselves and forces them into taking roles designed by a patriarchal order from which they are largely excluded. Giving his heroines their own voices with which to challenge the system, Hardy introduces the individual points of view of his heroines in the face of characters and narrators who struggle to see them as mere stereotypes. He addresses the
issue of women’s sexuality and deconstructs the notion of the “pure” in Tess. The hypocrisy of a system which gives a woman a passive sexual role and, at the same time, makes them responsible for any and all sexual indiscretions, is found to be inadequate and destructive. And Sue’s questioning of her obligation to be sexually responsive to a man as a result of a contract between them explores the punitive nature of marriage from a female perspective. Hardy also questions the likely bases for marriage: sexual inexperience, romantic love and pragmatism. All these questions are posed through his heroines, who challenge the power of patriarchal language, the repression of women’s sexuality and the necessity of marriage. These women struggle to explore their opportunities and limitations until they are finally and permanently silenced by the society against which they protest. Hardy’s fiction give the women room to demonstrate their individuality, voice their struggles, exhibit their sexuality and question the validity of the conventions forced upon them by the patriarchal society. Hardy does not only deal with “sexuality” and “prostitution” that were considered offensive topics at that time, but wrote “taboo-breaking” works that were at first scorned and rejected by many in the Victorian Society (Avery Simon and Rebecca, 2003: 185). Hardy gives a new and different view of women and in a certain way altered the society’s perception and treatment of women. As a matter of fact, “his intelligent and sympathetic portrayal of women is informed by his perception of the inextricable entanglement of gender and class issues” (Harvey, 34). Geoffrey Harvey also adds that Hardy “championed the struggle of the strong, intelligent, sexual woman to achieve selfhood and social freedom.” Patricia Ingham (1989) states that Hardy’s women are unlike the Victorian because they act to create a new sense for themselves by denying and resisting male oppression (Ingham, 185).
The women in Hardy’s novels are not perfect, and in fact, Hardy had himself vehemently rejected the model of the “perfect woman in fiction.” So he creates instead a group of women we can all relate to – natural, instinctive and human. Rosemarie Morgan sets forth the notion that Hardy’s fusion of moral seriousness and feminine sexuality yields, as she says, a set of fit and healthy, brave and dauntless, remarkably strong women. The sexual vitality which infuses their animate life generates vigour of both mind and body; from thence springs intelligence, strength, courage, and emotional generosity, and that capacity that so many Hardy heroines possess for self exposure expressing both daring and intimacy…the ultimate intimacy which demands facing the fear of ego-loss in those moments which call for abandon (xii).

Morgan also adds, “Hardy’s platform remains consistent and forthright: the world that denies autonomy, identity, purpose and power to women is to be, on his terms, the loser” (Morgan, xii). The women like Sally (“Interlopers on the Knap”), Leonara (“For Conscience Sake”), Lizzy (“The Distracted Preacher”), are as lovingly portrayed as Tess, Sue and Bathsheba, by the author whose vision of women never changes. His sympathetic insight into the struggles of these women, his understanding of their sexuality and his desire to see them emancipated and free is the reason Hardy can be called a writer with a feminist sensibility.

In all his works of fiction Hardy’s constructions of gender lead him to complex female protagonists who refused to be interpreted in essential terms. They are conceived within the power relationships of society but go on to challenge and subvert paternalistic sexual imaginations with its notions of essential femininity and straight forward gender patterns attributed to the sexes. Indeed, even the masculine ideals are shown as highly problematic. Barnett (“Fellow Townsmen”), Nicolas (“The Waiting Supper”), Sam Hobson (“The Son’s Veto”), Tony Kytes (“Tony Kytes, the Arch
Deceiver”) are some examples of men who experience struggles similar to the women’s in their journey through life. Hardy’s work teems with men and women who are realistically portrayed and active participants in the great drama of life. As Showalter observes, “For the [Hardyian] heroes…maturity involves a kind of assimilation of female suffering, identification with a woman which is also an effort to come to terms with their deepest selves” (Showalter, 10). Feminist criticism is deeply concerned with the ways in which the experience of being male or female in a particular society is reflected through the literary imagination, and Hardy has proven again and again through his work, his faithfulness to a similar vision.

Dellamora and Kincaid have identified valuable new approaches to Hardy’s depiction of sexuality. Importantly, both critics point to the ways in which Hardy’s fiction, simultaneously depicts and elicits sexual responses that is transgressive, not only for their failure to conform to standard rules governing courtship and marriage, but also for their failure to subscribe exclusively to the dictates of compulsory heterosexuality. In this field, however, there remains much to be done. In her groundbreaking book, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick makes only a brief mention of the Henchard-Fartrae relationship as subliminally erotic, but Hardy’s fiction offers great potential for an analysis of a gender framework in which women are the mediating link between men.

Homoerotic relationships are pervasive in Hardy and little has been done in this area. More ignored still, is the subject of female same sex desire in Hardy, which made an amazingly explicit appearance, complete with a lovemaking scene in bed, in the Cytherea – Miss Aldelyffe relationship of Desperate Remedies. Analogous to this is the scene in The Woodlanders where Grace Melbury and Felice Charmond, sexual rivals in
their respective relationships with Eden Fitzpiers, cling to each other when lost in the woods at night. In these scenes and others, Hardy presents physical and emotional ties between women that seem in the eyes of the twentieth century, startlingly explicit. Yet no one has thoroughly dealt with these relationships.
CITED WORKS

Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:


“Fiction,” rev. of *Wessex Tales* and *A Pair of Blue Eyes* in *Athenaeum*. 7 Sept. 1912. No.4424, p. 244.


