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Thomas Hardy was born in the community of Higher Bock Hampton, about two miles from the town of Dorchester, in Wessex, England, on June 02, 1840. His father was a bricklayer, who also made cider and enjoyed playing the fiddle at local festivities. From his example, Hardy seems to have derived the love of music and the interest in the public and social life of the English countryside that are such significant elements of his work. His mother had been orphaned at an early age and had worked as a cook and a maid until her marriage. She passed on to her son her great love of reading inherited from her mother, and had him reading Dryden and Johnson before he was ten. She also communicated to him her reserve and her awareness of "Life's Little Ironies" (the title of one of his volumes of short stories) and larger tragedies. According to his second wife's biography of him -written largely by himself -by the age of five he was convinced of his own uselessness and regretted that he would have to become an adult. It is claimed that the doctor attending Hardy's birth assumed that he was stillborn and that he was saved only by the
intervention of a sharp midwife. He was in any event a delicate and sickly child who was kept at home until he was eight and whose well-being was cause for constant anxiety. But fortunately Thomas Hardy could live well up to his eighty-eighth year.

At the age of eight, Thomas was sent to the local school in Higher Bockhampton, but he was transferred a year later to the Dorchester British school, which required him to walk several miles to and from school each day. Walking and exploring the local countryside would remain one of his chief pleasures for the rest of his life, as shown in such vivid passages in his fictions as the famous description of Egdon Heath that opens 'The Return of the Native'. After attendance at several other schools, Hardy had received an excellent education, but not one that qualified him for university study, and when he was sixteen, his formal education came to an end. Largely through his mother's efforts and financial sacrifice, he was apprenticed to John Hicks, a local architect. Since both Hicks, a tolerant and good-natured man, and another of his apprentices were admirers of that classics, Hardy found this experience not only a useful course of professional training but also an opportunity, through stimulating intellectual conversation,
to continue his broader education as well. According to his official biography he would get up to read - for two years he read virtually nothing but poetry - between five and eight a.m. before going off to work in the morning.

Having already steeped himself in the poetry of the Romantic period, he began in his late teens to write poetry himself. Not one line of it would see print until he was nearly sixty years of age, although in this period he did publish several short articles in local newspaper. It was also through his apprenticeship that Hardy made his first literary friendship, since the next-door neighbour of Hick’s office was William Barnes, a minister and teacher who was also an accomplished poet in the Dorset dialect. From Barnes, the developing young writer learned a great deal about the uses of local material in literature and about structure and sound values in poetry. At Barnes’s death in 1886, at the age of eighty-five, Hardy would memorialize him with both an obituary essay and an affectionate poem. Hardy also became a close friend of another Dorchester Minister, Horace Moule. Eight years older than Hardy, he was a writer and intellectual who introduced the younger man to scientific discoveries that cast doubt on the literal
truth of the Bible. The two remained close thereafter, and Hardy would be deeply distressed by Moule's descent into alcoholism and his suicide at forty-one, in May of 1873.

Having completed his apprenticeship in 1860, Hardy stayed with Hicks for another two years as a paid employee and then in April 17, 1862, six weeks short of his twenty-second birthday, he went, like many another young country man before and since, to find his fortune in London. He found a position with Arthur Blomfield, who, although only thirty-three years old, was already well-known for his work in the design and restoration of churches. In the great city he was also able to indulge his artistic interests through frequent visits to galleries and attendance at concerts and Operas. He also continued to write: in 1863 an essay of his won a silver medal from the Royal Institute of British Architects, and in 1865 he achieved the (anonymous) Magazine publication of a humorous piece called 'How I Built Myself a House'. He continued to write poems and to submit them to editors, who uniformly returned them, decades later, with some revisions, he could publish many of those poems in his volumes of verse.
Deciding that his best opportunity to support himself as a writer would be through the writing of fiction, in 1867 he began to write a novel, a social satire called *The Poor Man and the Lady*. It was rejected in turn by Alexander Macmillan, and by George Meredith, the distinguished novelists, both were nonetheless encouraging of Hardy's talent. He abandoned the book, but not his hopes for literary success. Meanwhile, John Hicks died in 1868, and his successor asked Hardy to assist him in the restoration of several churches. At the age of twenty-two Hardy moved to London and started to write poems, which idealized the rural life. He was an assistant in the Architectural firm of Arthur Blomfield, visited art galleries, attended evening classes in French at Kings College, enjoyed Shakespeare and Opera and read works of Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and John Stuart Mill whose positivism influenced him deeply. In 1867 Hardy left London for Dorset, and resumed work briefly with Hicks in Dorchester. He entered into a temporary engagement with Tryphena sparks, a sixteen years old relative. Hardy continued his architectural work, but encouraged by Emma Lavina Gifford, he started to write literature as his “true vocation.”
'In 1868, his first novel was published by Chapman and Hall, though George Meredith advised him not to publish it. After Mr. Hicks' death, Hardy moved to Weymouth to work for his successor, Crickmay. Here he started to write his second novel 'Desperate Remedies' (1871). These novels definitely encouraged him for his further novels like 'Under the Greenwood Tree' in 1872 and 'Far From the Madding Crowd' in 1874. Hardy married Emma Gifford after the publication of two novels. In 1878, he published 'The Return of the Native' and returned to London. At London, Hardy entered literary society and this was also the period of his most acknowledged work.

This zeal of his writing did not stop and impelled him to write nine more novels, three volumes of short stories and three volumes of poems. He also completed his only drama "The Dynasts" (1903-1908). His literary achievement brought him a great deal of fame and honour. Unfortunately he could not achieve the same fame and popularity at home i.e. with his wife. In short his family life was an unhappy one and he suffered a lot due to this. Still he was not appreciated by all the critics because his last novel, "Jude the Obscure" (1895) which was quite controversial
brought upon him much disgrace and charges of being immoral. It did not stop here rather it affected his personal life and resulted into the alienation from his wife, and public expressions against his work caused enough delusions. His second marriage, due to the demise of Emma in 1912 with Florence Dugdale, a lady much younger to him, could bring blossom in his married life. She could bring happiness to Hardy. Despite certain blows to his ideas he did not allow them to enter his personal life.

Thomas Hardy, one of the most widely read and respected English novelists, created an important artistic bridge between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The influence of Charles Darwin's 'Origin of Species' (1859) on his thought and his subsequent loss of orthodox religious faith affected all of his writings. Although his novels were uneven in skill, when he stayed in the rural setting of his youth and focused on relations between the sexes, they took on a tragic power rarely equaled by other English novelists. He is credited with introducing fatalism into Victorian literature....... a pessimistic assessment of humanity's ability to cope with a changing social environment. In two of Hardy's final novels 'Tess of the D'Urbervilles' (1891) and
'Jude the Obscure' (1896) his free and open treatment of sexuality and marriage caused such an outrage among the puritanical Victorian public that he was deeply disillusioned. Although he is now celebrated as an author, Hardy was increasingly out of sympathy with his age. In 'Tess of the D'Urbervilles', he directly confronted late Victorian attitudes to the 'fallen woman', asserting that Tess, though not a virgin, was a 'pure woman'. Tess, 'a pure woman' as the subtitle of the novel calls her, is the victim of a hypocritical sexual morality. She finally kills Alec, the man who caused her disgrace. But then society punishes her for that crime too. 'Jude the Obscure' caused outright scandal with the stonemason Jude, torn between his love for Arabella Donn, a sensual, extravert pig farmer's daughter, and for his highly strung and sexually inhibited cousin, Sue Bridehead. Protest caused by its overt treatment of sexual passion and its attack on orthodox Christianity, popular education and institution of marriage drove Hardy to abandon writing fiction for poetry for the rest of his life.

Thomas Hardy has always been described as a 'Pessimist' writer, but it was not Thomas Hardy who was pessimistic but the age in which he was living compelled him to seem pessimistic. It
was a disturbing age for a sensitive mind because it was an age of transition. The old ethics of living were sacrificed and new values influenced by science were accepted. In short there was a great deal of controversy between the old values and the new values. At the same time it can be said that Thomas Hardy came out as the emancipator of women with the help of his novels. The title 'a pessimist writer' given to him wasn't liked by him rather he rejected this phenomenon. It was only because of these people's shortsightedness that they called him so and even today some take on the same view. Hardy was quite conscious about what he was writing, his perception about life and people was quite clear. Eliot rightly remarks (Qtd. from Indra Mohan.) that "He was confident that his conception of life was soon destined to be a popular one—one which would be held by generations yet to come." (Mohan, p. 260)

Hardy had also the humanitarian sense like many other novelists. It is quite clear that human life can be studied from different aspects. Some of the writers present in their writings the agony of the poor and the downtrodden, some talk about their racial discrimination, some give rise to ethnical problems or some
of them prefer to be feminist. Thomas Hardy can be called as a man who had feminine sensibility and it is seen in his novels. "We cannot disagree with Lawrence, for Hardy himself says 'what are my books but one plea against man’s inhumanity to man, to woman to lower animals whatever may be the inherent good or evil of life, it is certain that men make it much worse than need be." (Prasad, p. 98) With regard to every woman Hardy cared to take an interest in the pattern of response and reaction is almost the same, whatever little variation there is, is mainly due to the type of reciprocation from the other side. David Cecil remarks (Qtd. from, Indra Mohan) that, "Hardy regards human life as his most fundamental aspect. He thought human being as a representative of the species than as an individual. His theme is related to mankind’s quandary in the universe."(Mohan Indra, p. 260)

'Thomas Hardy was a master of the art of characterisaiton. He chose his characters from lower strata of society because he believed that while the characters and actions of people from high society are concealed by convention, the rustics are free from any such control. Hence, in their case character is fully revealed and
can easily be portrayed. Thus Thomas Hardy excelled in the portrayal of simple elemental natures. His female characters are vigorous and more skillful than his male characters. (Jaypalan, N.p.289) Hardy was acutely conscious of his humble class origins and modest education. This sensibility to social rank and privilege remained with him throughout his life and informed his fiction and poetry. Many of his plots centered on the prejudicial effects of notions of class and social position on sexual relationships. Hardy’s mother - Jemima Hand - had social and intellectual aspirations but her plans were curtailed when, three months pregnant she married Thomas Hardy senior in December 1839. Hardy’s first-hand knowledge of the economic hardships suffered by rural women and their pragmatic attitudes to sexual relationships, coupled with his friendships with forward thinking and cultured women in London, encouraged the development of strikingly unconventional conceptions of women and sexuality in his novels. During his lifetime his fiction earned him the respect of feminist writers like Mary Sinclair (1863-1946) and George Egerton (1859-1945)
During the time Hardy became one of the greatest novelists of the Victorian age. It is equally true that Thomas Hardy is indeed, one of the greatest novelists in the whole range of English Literature. He has also been called as a Shakespeare of the English novel by many critics. After his first novel 'Desperate Remedies' appeared in 1871, he did not retreat in the field of writing fiction and novels after novels flowed from his pen in quick succession. There are many famous novels at his record which created a safe place for him in the queue of the stalwarts. His novels like 'The Mayor of the Casterbridge', 'The Return of the Native', 'Tess of the D'Urbervilles', 'Jude the Obscure', 'Far From the Madding Crowd', 'The Woodlanders', etc are not only regarded by universal constant as his masterpieces, but they have been compared to the great Shakespearean tragedies. His novels are questioning about life. He persistently probed into the life of the human being and constantly searched for the causes of human predicament and attacked accepted beliefs. Man's predicament in the universe was the theme of Thomas Hardy's novels.

It can be said that he democratized the English novel. Hardy introduced new ground in another respect also. He was the first
English novelist who dared to make a woman who has sinned or who was an adulteress, the heroine of the novel. Tess is a woman with a bleak past, yet Hardy made her the heroine of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles.* Similarly, Sue Bridehead, heroine of *Jude the Obscure* is also an adulteress. Hardy thus moved the Victorian ideals of morality and for his venture he was deadly criticised as being immoral and a corrupter of the people. It resulted that his books were burnt by most of his opponents. But he did not yield; he rather chose to give up novel-writing when the bitter attacks of his critics were too much for him. The detail study of his major novels shows that his female characters are better and more forceful than his male characters, because women are more elemental, 'nearer to nature' than men.

It can be said that Thomas Hardy, as discussed above made a pioneering effort to collapse sexual taboos in literature. He, in his novels, declined the female literary stereotype and presented a woman free from all conflicts. There is a strong accusation against double sexual morality and marriage as an institution in his novels like *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1896). The new women presented by him and his contemporary
novelists, have distinct characteristics as they are educated, well read and having horrifying frankness about sex. They can be called against marriage as an institution for its restricting the human freedom. Though these women tried to travel against the current, their journey for seeking individual happiness in a society was extremely difficult and audacious. For their unconventional efforts of emancipation they had to pay sometime the great penalties like mental breakdowns, and suicides. Thomas Hardy spoke for the feminist course but at the same time he also brought into the notice of the society that it was quite difficult for women to free themselves completely from the orthodox and conventional ways of society which have been imposed on them for generations together. After accepting the principles of the freedom and equality, these heroines could not help suffering the sense of weary disillusionment which initiated them to their final yielding to the conventions in a broken way.

"Major novelists such as Hardy, Meredith and Gissing, joined the battle for artistic freedom and began to write explicitly about topics associated with the 'New Woman', and in the 1890s a group of popular writers dubbed the 'New Woman novelists'
created a sensation with their highly polemical and often lurid feminist fiction. Heroines who refused to conform to the traditional feminine role challenged accepted ideals of marriage and maternity chose to work for a living, or who in any way argued the feminist cause, became commonplace in the works of both major and minor writers and were firmly identified by readers and reviewers as New Women."(Cunningham, p.3) Few novelists specifically identified their heroines as New Women; the term was too loaded with associations of eccentricity and fanaticism. Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* was all interpreted as problem novel on the New Woman theme. "Hardy in *Jude the obscure* not only intended to exhibit the theory of candid sex but his chief intention was to introduce the world 'New Woman' by her explicit consciousness about herself as a member of the patriarchal society rightly seeking her emancipation from the chains of society. Sue's views about sex will let the people doubt about her physical maturity or even her nobility may create doubts in the mind of these people. But Hardy wanted to show her as a member of repressed sex impulse and seeking sexual independence. This brings us to the important question of
feminism in Hardy's novels. In the beginning Hardy's feminist attitude was inconsistent. It is contended that his "early work reflected the conventions more or less uncritically, but he became increasingly uneasy with them, in his later work, until, in Jude and especially in 'The Well Beloved', a dialectical structure is developed in which the 'voice' of patriarchy faltered before the women that Hardy created. But in fact Hardy turned back to conventional patriarchal sentiments in 'The Mayor of the Casterbridge' (1885) after adopting strong feminist cause in 'The Return of the Native' (1878) which foretold the later novel in anti-conventional outlook. Even 'Far From the Madding Crowd' flashes a heroine who, in spite of her basic weakness, evinces a 'self'-delighting auto-erotic passion which bespeaks her independence."

(Chakrabarti, p.125)

"However, it was a society towards which Hardy as an outsider felt intensely ambivalent. His frequent visits to the houses of aristocratic ladies disturbed his wife Emma, who did not accompany him. Their marriage, which had not produced children, had ceased to be a happy one and at this period was in decline. Emma's religious mania made her husband's agnosticism
offensive to her, she bitterly resented his attraction to women, and she had a limited comprehension of the pressures under which a famous writer laboured. In his turn, Hardy seems to have become emotionally estranged from her.” (Harvey, p.9)

“Irving Howe confidently declared in 1966 that Hardy had a special knack “for creeping intuitively into the emotional life of women, that as a writer of novels he was endowed with a precious gift: he liked women.” Howe’s comments were often endorsed by other critics, and many early studies of Hardy’s women continued the celebration of Hardy as a man with what Howe had called on “openness to the feminine principle.” So in 1976 Anne Z Mickelson opened her book on ‘Thomas Hardy’s women and Men’ by arguing that Hardy “anticipates much of the thinking in the 1970 on men and women, especially women” and that his approach to “the role of woman in society” is often searching sometimes speculative, frequently perceptive and always compassionate. Three years later, Rosalind Miles praised Hardy for his ability to bring “his female characters so fully to life as women before us.” (Kramer Dale, p.98) “So Hardy’s desire for several women according to Miles made him supremely understanding of women
in general and aided him in the sympathetic and vibrant depiction of his realistic female characters. Boumelha saw Hardy's women as cultural signs, representation of historical ideas about women and about gender. "Hardy's female reader .....will undoubtedly continue both to applaud his feminism and to deplore his sexism, sensing simultaneously in his novels their "narrative grammar", which empathizes so deeply with the plight of the culturally marginalized female, and their 'scopic economy' in which male consciousness is explored subjectively while female consciousness is quietly and systematically elided." (Ibid, p. 104)

In the 1912 Preface to 'Jude the Obscure' Hardy noted that reviewers in Germany had associated Sue with women of the feminist movement -"bachelor" girls and a lively critical dispute since then has not settled whether Hardy intends the time to be the 1860s or the 1890s, and whether the issue is with awareness of economic restrictions on women's work or with analogies with the New Women 'movement'. "Gail Cunningham has argued for the 1890s, pointing to rejection of "shifting social conventions", a "franker approach" to sexuality 'interest' in 'vast new areas of
female psychology and behaviour’ ‘alternatives to marriage, including divorce, and free love.’ (Ibid, p. 169-170)

As Pratibha Tyagi writes, “for Hardy, sex is neither vulgar nor sacred but quite natural and instinctive. Man is the symbol of creative energy and woman the means for procreation. “The function of child-bearing is the central idea in Hardy’s view of women. The business of life is to reproduce life; existence is for the sake of existence. Nature, seeking only to prolong the species, has given this function pre-eminently to woman. Hence woman’s instinctive assertion of charm against which the intelligence of men revolts but to which his instincts succumb. What has been called the “capriciousness” of Hardy’s women is in reality their immediate and instinctive obedience to emotional impulsive without the corrective control of the intelligence. It is one form through which the All-Mover, the Prime Impulse, works, darkly, unreasoningly.” (Tyagi, p. 103)

Hardy overthrew the old conception of morality and prudishness and ventured to depict the sexual relations between men and women. He even permitted his character to live together without being married. No doubt he was strongly opposed for
this adventure and many copies of his novel were publicly burnt by clergymen and others. It resulted that he stopped writing novels and turned to write poetry. He was convinced with the contemporary conditions in England and knew very well that the era in which he was living was not ready to accept the candid treatment of sex even in books. Jude reveals Hardy’s caution as he tells Sue;

"Perhaps as we couldn’t conscientiously marry at first in the old fashioned way we ought to have parted. Perhaps the world is not illuminated enough for such experiments as ours! Who were we, to think we could act as pioneers!" (J.O, Part VI, Ch, III, p. 347)

Hardy was more demanding about sex. He did not justify fornication. None of his heroines is lusty. He only rejected the improper imposition of an uncompromising morality. Hardy fought against the British attitude that a woman should have a bad marriage than to be a spinster. It is because, until the seventies and eighties of the twentieth century, the unmarried women were not respected in society and were not even allowed to enter into suitable professions. It was their sole business to be a maidservants or governesses. In short marriage was supposed to be the only remedy that can give woman well status and decorum in the
society as well as the economic security. But Hardy was strongly against such kind of marriages which could bring the free women into the cages called homes and to the ringmasters called husbands.

'The status and position of women in Victorian society was based on the account of them as described for instance by Romances which indicated that 'they were by nature inferior, more like children than men. This picture of them was inscribed in the law, particularly after marriage in their non-status as voters, in the kind of limited education provided for them, and in literature. Novels both reflected and confirmed 'the conventional account of women as essentially different from men and inferior to them. Consequently when Hardy began to write novels which increasingly focused on what he called the 'woman interest' he did so in a language which was already highly constrained. Yet from the beginning in his fiction, when treating the 'woman interest', he showed surprising signs of unconventionality. At first these were occasional but later his acceptance of equality between the sexes became paramount, despite his unhappy first marriage. Certain stereotypes of ideal or of unreconstructed deviant women were
handed on as literary currency in the mainstream fiction to which he aspired. Changing this aspect of the medium was not easy, a writer can deviate from the mainstream to produce anomalous figures but whether or not that change is accommodated by becoming part of novelistic language is dependent on other factors.' (Ingham, p. 129)

When Hardy sub-titled *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, 'A Pure Woman' he was - as he must have known perfectly well-issuing a deliberately provocative challenge to conventional notions of purity. Obviously this break through the conventional bounds of fiction carried, far-reaching implications for the freedom of the novel in general and the portrayal of women in particular. It is only Thomas Hardy, particularly from the midnineteenth century, who wished to arouse sympathy for a fallen woman and risked portraying her as remotely sensual.

"Where Hardy is more bold is in his presentation of the fallen woman in Tess, the one novel which lacks such a stereotypical dichotomy simply because the heroine absorbs both prototypes in one personality. The fallen woman is now also the
pure one just as in the amalgamation of two other opposites, Tess is simultaneously poor woman and lady." (Hands, p. 78)

The present thesis aims at studying Hardy’s daring of portrayal of his women characters with different qualities which were restricted to women in the Victorian age. It also aims to show his portrayal of their suffering due to the conventions and orthodox social laws along with his presentation of his women as rebel and New Women. The focus is also on his women characterisation and their struggle for existence in the patriarchal society. Though he cannot be called a complete feminist writer, he had deep sympathy and sensibilities for them. Hardy has always been studied either as the pessimistic writer or the fatalist he has been called by many as a misogynist but it shows only the partial study of his novels. Therefore the attempt is also made to show his heroines of feminist qualities though ultimately they have to yield before the society. Nevertheless their efforts to become free and independent are noteworthy. It allured the researcher to study Hardy’s novels from the feminist perspective.
References


