Chapter 5

Conclusion

Recognizing the voyeuristic impulse and activities of characters is an important critical task in an analysis of the relationship of the self and the other in the realm of interpersonal relationship in Hardy’s novels. Female sexuality is basically defined in terms of man-woman contact within the compass of heterosexual encounters in those novels. And it is primarily through the voyeuristic acts of the masculine subjects and the narrator that the women as other are objectified and thereby defined in Hardy’s novels. For instance, the sustained focus on Tess’s face, the reenactment of her somnambulism and her continual exposure to the violent male gaze expose the voyeur-narrator’s exercise of the ceaseless repetition of rules which stabilizes the identity of the woman as vulnerable sexualized object in relation to the masculine subject-position as a predator. And voyeurism also plays a key role in the constitution of the masculine subjects’ solipsistic mode of being which dissuades them from experiencing a direct and mutually enriching relationship with the feminine other.

As voyeurism offers one crucial way to objectify women, the explication of the voyeurs’ motives and strategies enable the readers to consider it as an inaugural route for delving deeply into the issue of the representation and the theorization of women in a patriarchal society. There is certainly an attempt in Hardy’s novels to disguise the politics of the male gaze through the production of an illusion of sexuality prior to the intervention of power. But the eye as an erotogenic zone ceases to be a pre-discursive and purely anatomical fact and thus finds itself implicated in the discourse of patriarchal knowledge-formation in the nineteenth century.

The voyeuristic male gaze objectifies women fragmenting the female body which is expressed in the subjects’ obsessive engagement with the sexualized body-parts of Tess and
Eustacia. It also objectifies women like Eustacia projecting them as alien and exotic beings which, like a strategy in the colonial mode of control, is related to the politics of otherisation justifying the intervention of the possessive masculine subjects in all spheres of life. Although the construction of the feminine other as a source of enigma in Hardy’s novels dismantles the patriarchal stereotypes about womanhood to a certain extent, this subversive function of the trope of feminine obscurity is sometimes negated because the discursively constructed notion of unknowability renders the women immaterial, passive and subordinate in an unjust patriarchal set-up in which the masculine identity is marked by its authority on the social circulation of knowledge and meaning. In a certain way, an examination of the voyeuristic male gaze also helps in assessing the masculine subjects’ profound sense of unfulfilment. Though they become aware of the unstable and reductive nature of the images of women formed through their voyeuristic activity, they cannot sacrifice it as a tool of domination.

Apart from the masculine subjects, the peasants, workers and the community as a whole, the voyeur-narrator objectifies women while giving in *Tess* the minute details of the body-parts, repeating the phallic imagery of penetration and reenacting her physical humiliation through the invocation of images of violence. Similarly, readers, conforming to the assumptions of the realist narrative, also find themselves co-opted in the perception of the male viewers and thus, as voyeurs, contribute to the systematic objectification of women. The use of multiple points of view, the coextensive progression of the voyeur-narrator and Angel’s gaze and similar techniques strengthen the position of the masculine subjects as voyeurs and as a corollary, suggest the overwhelming impact of male voyeurism over the women.

Though transgressive erotic stances are expected from women, evident in the portrayal of Bathsheba on horseback, those moments are self-cancelling for the women as they are not able to
negotiate the voyeuristic male gaze in the sense that their unselfconsciousness or the lack of knowledge of the presence of the male voyeur is a prerequisite for the accomplishment of the voyeuristic project. The women’s unselfconsciousness, in a typical voyeuristic situation, deprives them of the possibility of participating in the situation through encountering the voyeur in concrete terms. Voyeurism neither offers any possibility for assessing a woman as an individual because the voyeur’s intention which predominates in the field of vision finally disconnects him from the woman’s concrete presence and the multiple dimensions of her personality. In spite of the inconsistency and ambiguity central to the act of seeing this was given recognition in the prioritization of “subjective vision” in the nineteenth century. In keeping with Kant’s argument that dominated the nineteenth-century aesthetics, the focus in the study of vision was not on the features of that being observed, but on the intention or the feeling of the observer. That a voyeur’s space is exclusively determined by the imaginary condition of his own desire irrespective of the changes occurring in the field of sight is evident in Boldwood’s self-indulgent love or in Oak’s feeling for Bathsheba that grows ‘without any corresponding effect’ (Hardy, *Far* 23). In moments of sexual fantasy too, accompanied or produced by the voyeuristic activity in the novels, there is often a reenactment of the voyeur’s gaze in which a voyeur like Boldwood makes fanciful assumptions about the sender of a letter. These moments also testify to the supremacy of a voyeur’s intention whose foreknowledge, guesswork and flights of imagination steadily separate him from the person occupying the object-position as she really is.

And, since in the context of the voyeuristic male gaze, a woman has no value except as an eroticized being, the effect of male voyeurism is all the more destructive for her when she, conscious of the male gaze, tries to internalize it for gaining credibility in patriarchal society. When a woman, through the internalization of the objectifying gaze of the voyeur, seeks to find a
justification of her being in her body as a reductively produced phenomenon in patriarchal society she fails to treat herself as an individual. Appropriating the look of a male surveyor, Bathsheba, for instance, transforms herself into a desirable object through exoticization and self-display while watching her own image in the mirror. Moreover, she is finally pulled out from the “safety” of this solipsistic state into a public mode of being by the operation of the male gaze.

The destabilizing impact of male voyeurism on women is also evident in their intense feeling of insecurity evident in Bathsheba’s awareness of the all-engulfing eyes in the cornmarket and Tess’s enquiry whether the trees have inquisitive eyes. Bathsheba is also overpowered by Troy’s gaze when they meet for the first time which seems to stabilize her identity as a “prisoner” evoking the implications of sexual dominance and submission (Hardy, *Far* 128).

At the centre of voyeuristic activity, there is a spirit of self-sufficiency or self-indulgence which not only develops into the practice of romantic male individualism but also informs the basic strategies of patriarchal knowledge-formation aimed at reducing women to what they are not, possessing them and denying their subjectivity. Henchard, as a male individualist, considers women detrimental to the masculine project of self-care in the initial phase of his career and yet, confronting an “emotional void,” tries to ensure an absolute possession of the women around him making them means to his ends (Hardy, *The Mayor* 113). Angel’s possessive self is satisfied only when he finds Alec murdered as it ensures the uninterrupted control of his gaze over Tess. Tess’s destruction can therefore be interpreted as a consequence of their attempt to stabilize their identity. Thus the presence of a rival enhancing the desirability of a woman as an object implies that women are used only as excuse for the reinforcement of the masculine identity.

And while objectifying women, the masculine subjects do not even hesitate to exercise violence particularly expressed in Troy’s swordplay. Arabella’s sexual aggressiveness and
Eustacia’s transformation into a lifeless art object are instances of the other various ways in which men objectify women as a form of self-defense because they consider female sexuality a threat to masculine integrity. The assumption that Troy exercises violence out of a fear of being objectivized by the other is confirmed when the readers’ attention is drawn to the occasional glimpses of eagerness with which Bathsheba responds to the swordplay and her strange sense of delight mixed with a sense of horror. And because of this threat, the traditional connection between the sexual and the demonic in Christian imagination is not only cemented but also given a particular misogynistic dimension in the mid-Victorian conceptualization of gender.

While male health was considered to be informed with the principle of self-control in the Victorian era, a woman’s health was marked by her archetypal inability to control the body and achieve self-restraint. The disastrous effect of the internalization of this dominant patriarchal ideology on women is also perceived when Tess grows melancholic after being humiliated for her pre-marital sexual experience and Sue, an engaged reader of erotic literature, develops a tremendous sense of guilt for her own sexual arousal. Engaged with the disruptive potential of female sexuality, a male individualist like Henchard falls back upon the archetype of the “self-made” man, which, connected with the core ideology of Victorian manliness, involves the ideological negation of female agency. Ashamed of sexual desire, Jude and Angel try to regulate their own bodies as possessions to achieve masculine self-control though the bodies, used as possessions, violate the will of their masters.

Negotiating with female sexuality as a source of anxiety, the masculine subjects degrade the self-assertive women like Eustacia and Arabella situating their unconventional behavior and practices in the context of the city as a culturally degenerated space. Arabella, as a sexual object, is connected with unclean animals like pigs which shows how repulsion functions in western
culture legitimizing the project of constituting the other as degraded entity through expulsion. In these novels Susan is sold like a disposable commodity, Eustacia is projected as a witch for her nonconformity to the prescribed limit of femininity and Lucetta is subjected to an extreme form of community disapproval when Farfrae’s men organize a satirical mummery without considering its impact on the woman. To negate a woman’s agency in the patriarchal order and therefore to render her indeterminate and powerless at the narrative level, efforts are made to create ambiguity around Eustacia’s death and to cancel Tess’a self-awareness in crucial moments including those of erotic response. Such metaphoric exclusions reduce women to non-entities and therefore the question of their own assessment of situations remains largely unaddressed as the narrator and the masculine subjects ceaselessly try to confine them to their role as sexualized beings.

To get rid of the anxiety produced by a woman’s presence, the narrator employs techniques of de-eroticization evident in Tess’s transformation into an idealized abstraction and into mythological being like Artemis and Demeter through the use of setting and allusions and the diffusion of her “vitality into the other realms of nature” (Thompson 118). Identified with nature, Tess is also rendered a passive site creating the justification of the masculine intervention as, in the case of the Scientific Revolution in the West, there developed the idea of possessing and transforming nature as an essentially masculine activity. Eustacia is also made a part of the landscape and a part of mythology. The maternal body is used as a trope of ideological containment and the preconceived notions as to women’s mythical capacity for suffering are reiterated in the texts to neutralize a woman’s sexually disruptive presence and thus to render it a suitable object for consumption by men. Quite in keeping with that purpose, the male members of the community, for instance, expect that Eustacia will marry putting an end to her solipsistic
pleasures. The moral commotion caused by Sue’s absence at night in the training school followed by her expulsion exposes the fact that like marriage as a social institution, the education system was also steeped in misogynistic values that reinforced the subjection of women in the Victorian era. Angel’s demand for absolute sexual purity and his subsequent abandonment of Tess also demonstrate the misogynistic nature of the sexual ideology of the English bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century marked by adherence to the virginity ethic and sexual double standard.

No discussion of this patriarchal politics of domination is complete without reference to the production of a formidable body of knowledge about feminine identity in the Victorian era aimed at validating the gender discrimination and the exploitation of women. The angelic women like Sue and Tess who are subject to regimented morality and the de-eroticizing representational practices are purposefully segregated from deviant women like Arabella who, as debased and demonized sexual objects, threaten the conventional patriarchal morality in numerous ways. But the virgin-vamp divide collapses in the novels as it is in direct contradiction to another inner-outer divide which constitutes the foundation of misogynistic principles in the Victorian patriarchal regime implying that women are, in general, outwardly fair but deep within they operate as agents of threatening instability and moral corruption. And this inner-outer divide is supposed to justify the orthodox patriarchal intervention in the regulation of the unsteady and fragile female body as a malfunctioning organism standing for moral disorder in society. The women’s refusal to be accommodated into such neat categorizations also dismantles the virgin-vamp divide which is indicated in Jude’s failure to protect the idealized image of Sue as he, like a stereotyped voyeur, gradually finds himself obsessed with her sexuality. The representation of Eustacia’s incoherent fantasy and the intellectual rigour of Elizabeth-Jane bordering on morbidity also throw light on the reductive nature of the Victorian conceptualization of gender
that defines women as non-rational beings whose erotic presence is supposed to be affected by meditative or intellectual activities. The “coherent” system of regulative concepts in patriarchy, thus, does not fully explain and contain the tangible presence of the women and their complicated psychological make-up.

Efforts are made to conceal the direct participation of the narrator as an incarnate being in voyeuristic activity by situating him behind the screen formed by the masculine subjects, appointing some of them as surrogates for him and transforming him into a trans-historical consciousness. But the thinking masculine subject who distinguishes himself from the feminine other on the basis of his ability to operate exclusively in terms of pure mind and thus rejects the body as an obstacle to rational thought is displaced from its self-proclaimed superiority. His feeling, imagination and bodily response to women as embodied beings frustrate his intention of behaving as a disincarnate self. The classic position of a voyeur in Hardy’s novels implying his attempt to behave as a disincarnate self is, for instance, frustrated by his participation, as a voyeur, in erotic situations which involves an active functioning of his own body and its sensory organs. And thus, the presence of the body as a concrete and irreducible object causes a rupture in the deterministic knowledge-system of patriarchy founded on the use of a totalitarian form of reason as a tool for controlling the feminine other. Engaged with the other in the sphere of interpersonal relationship, the masculine subjects cannot help undergoing changes which certainly damages their efforts to achieve a static and self-sufficient mode of survival manifested in the acts of voyeurism, male individualism and other forms of solipsistic behavior. Angel, for instance, is horrified to observe that his ideal of Victorian moral austerity is dismantled in his encounter with Tess’s eroticized presence. Contrary to their self-fashioning as stable and
autonomous beings, the identity of the masculine subjects is reconfigured not only through the reciprocity but also the inversion of the gaze.

The intention to possess the feminine other in order to stabilize the subject-position ironically gives rise to the feeling of anxiety in the minds of the masculine subjects. Angel and Alec’s response to Tess, for instance, show their fear of losing the woman as a possessed object. It also introduces an element of sexual rivalry, thereby reducing the efficacy of patriarchy as an internally consolidated system of domination. Angel and Jude’s failure to maintain self-restraint in sexual matters show that even the master’s body possessed as an object, can go against his project of self-control. This is also evident in Troy’s swordplay which, in spite of being an expression of aggressive male sexuality, exposes his feeling of insecurity and also his awareness of the inadequacy of his own body used as a tool for dominating others. The way the masculine subjects attach abjection to femininity for degrading a woman like Arabella ironically disrupts the patriarchal discourse of control as the erotic dimension of her personality which has an overwhelming impact on the male viewers around her is inextricably connected with her degraded identity. A more self-consciously accomplished redeployment of the ideological tool of patriarchy is evident in the way Tess transforms the discourse of shame into a discourse of pleasure. Though Bathsheba adopts the masculine role of surveying herself as an object in the mirror, the autoerotic or narcissistic dimension of the situation gives the readers an impression of her pleasure otherwise unavailable within the confines of patriarchal power-relations. All these suggest that patriarchy, far from being an invulnerable system, is defenceless against its own repressive devices which invite and even generate the possibilities of resistance. In certain situations with sadomasochistic implications the women’s internalization of the dominant male gaze and yet their simultaneous attempt to keep their distance expose the ambivalence of the
patriarchal discourse of control. Negotiating with patriarchy, however, always remains a difficult task as women are forced to live in a social set-up founded on the principle of gender discrimination. And Hardy as an author was not in a position to deal directly and explicitly with the erotic potential of a woman like Eustacia. Eustacia’s eagerness to respond to the amorous move of the stranger in her erotic dream is, for instance, appropriated by the cultural codes of male hegemony as her emotions are represented in negative terms for there is no change in the existing dominance-submission pattern.

However, apart from initiating subversive negotiation with patriarchy in a conservative social set-up, women also interrogate the dominant patriarchal relations in more direct ways. For despite their location in the discourse of phallic sexuality, they try to give expression to their feelings as desiring subjects. This is clear in the way Sue allows Phillotson to place his arm around her waist and also in Eustacia’s dance with Wildeve that brings a “new vitality” to her being (Hardy, *The Return* 204).

In Bathsheba’s response to the swordplay, there is a mix of delight and horror which creates a subtext of resistance displacing the stereotype of women as passive recipients. Apart from asserting their authority in sexual matters which is evident in the seduction of Jude and in Oak’s confusion after finding Bathsheba holding his head in her lap, women like Arabella and Bathsheba also show their practical wisdom and self-reliance in the public space, particularly, in managing finance in unfavourable situations. Tess, an unmarried mother and a religious sceptic, not only shows remarkable courage and endurance in psychologically destabilizing situations but also begins living with her seducer and challenges the validity of the virginity ethic in a patriarchal society. In rejecting the idea of commitment in love relations and allowing Charley to hold and kiss her bare hand for quarter of an hour Eustacia transgresses the norms of female
respectability which, like Elizabeth-Jane’s capacity for emotional restraint and Bathsheba’s unperturbed state of mind in undressing Troy’s body, also involves an interrogation of the logic of gender-stereotyping that functions as the basis of patriarchal power-relations. Suggesting that sexual impulse, like the forces of nature, can be seen as an amoral phenomenon independent of the discursive production of morality, the narrator enables the women to interrogate the institution and codes of marriage. Demanding sexual autonomy for women, Sue protests against the institutionalization of marriage by the church and the state and also against the existing divorce laws marked by the sexual double standard.

Like sexual fantasy, voyeurism not only produces unique moments of pleasure but also a deep feeling of unfulfilment as it suspends the face-to-face encounter and communication with the sexual object. Thevoyeurs realize that though they reduce the women to their sexualized body-parts, the latter often disrupt the patriarchal stereotypes as, for instance, there are features of Tess’s body not in tune with her sexualized image as formed through the voyeuristic gaze. With a strange mix of sexual and moral vigour in her personality, Tess exposes the inadequacy of both de-eroticization and objectification as two central paradigms in the discursive production of her image. However, the voyeurs’ unfulfilment cannot be satisfactorily explained with reference to the difference between an auto-erotic response attending voyeuristic activity and the sexual consummation involving genital contact with another individual. This is because love itself is reduced to a fundamentally elusive and in that sense fantasmic space in the novels owing to the characters’ possessive and egocentric nature. It is not that the voyeurs are unhappy in the novels because voyeurism does not allow them to have a full-fledged sexual relationship involving genital contact. The sexual aim need not be reduced to coitus in the novels as, by the “overvaluation” at the sexual level, the erotogenic zones can operate as substitutes to the
genitals, thereby attaining self-sufficiency to a certain extent. In Hardy’s novels the lovers are unhappy because they are incapable of responding to each other with generosity. The masculine subjects in general feel a fundamental sense of emptiness in any form of sexual relation because of their failure to relate to the other the utmost expression of which is their voyeuristic activity that gives them a “fixity” in their solipsistic mode of being.

The women, as the secluded other, definitely protest against the patriarchal order, which, as Beauvoir shows, is sustained by culturally constructed misconceptions about women’s sexuality and fertility. And though the women are absolutely justified in negotiating with the patriarchal discourse of control, their acts of retaliation are also marked by the use of equally reductive strategies. The way Eustacia, propelled by sexual rivalry, refuses Wildeve to touch her hands and Arabella throws a pig’s penis at Jude show how the women, while returning the gaze, prefer to consider men as their objects of possession. And this vicious cycle of mutual objectification deprives both the masculine subject and the feminine other in Hardy’s novels of the opportunity of recognizing the distinctive qualities of each other and interpreting the interpersonal relationship as a space of transcendence.

“Much of the language of most Victorian novels,” J. Hillis Miller observes, “is used to express the narrator’s awareness of the characters in their awareness of themselves in relation to other people” (“Time and Intersubjectivity” 203). The failure of the project of romantic male individualism in the novels also confirms the truth that “the self-consciousness of a single person becoming aware of himself in separation from other people” (Miller “Time and Intersubjectivity” 203) is less important for Hardy as a Victorian novelist than the characters’ “awareness of themselves as aware of one another” which is manifested in the sphere of interpersonal relationship (Miller “Time and Intersubjectivity” 207). Marcel’s notion of the availability of the
self engaged in a dialogic relation with others, Levinas’s explanation of the inadequacy of the arbitrary nature of the self’s freedom and the location of the other outside the deterministic knowledge of the subject as found in Buber’s theory enable the readers to explain what the Hardy’s characters fail to achieve in the space of interpersonal relationship and why they fail. According to Marcel and Levinas whose observations inform the current research, the subject should feel shame for its inadequacy and consequently develop a sense of surrender while encountering the other, who, for them, is someone placed beyond the causal relations and whose incomprehensibility frustrates the reductive ideological mechanisms of the subject. An awareness of the incohesion or the arbitrariness of the self’s position of authority, which, for Marcel, is a precondition for the act of welcoming the other, can lead to a decentering of the self hardly experienced by Hardy’s masculine subjects who find themselves preoccupied with their own thoughts of security and aspirations. Because of their totalitarian project of dominance they cannot realize the vulnerability of their position of authority. Afraid of the risks involved in a full act of surrender to the feminine other, Angel, while in love with Tess, tries to protect his superior position in terms of class and academic hierarchy and Jude tries to avoid his own responsibility for the sexual affair with Arabella. Whereas a genuine experience of the other, for Levinas, consists in taking responsibility for the other and exposing oneself to one’s own alterity, the masculine subjects put constraints on the activity of the women evident in Oak’s embarrassment regarding the close relation between Bathsheba and Boldwood and his suggestion that Bathsheba should not trust Troy.

Hardy’s masculine subjects fail to welcome the other as instructor as it is mentioned in Levinas’s theory because like the typical Kantian subjects they adhere to the Victorian ethics of manliness in which they, obsessed with their preconceived misogynistic notions and voyeuristic
imagination, are unwilling to undergo any changes while the knowable objects are assumed to conform to the cultural requirements of the subjects. They mostly fail to behave in a responsible and generous manner, abandoning the drive for comprehension and control because their solipsism and their misogynistic construction of the gender-divide create impediments to the achievement of what Buber calls the “directness of relation” (The Writings 46). And because of the absence of this directness which does not involve any methodological principle but a readiness to listen to the other and learn from concrete experience and recognition of the possibility of something new being created in the relationship, the masculine subjects develop the habit of seeing the others as fixed beings. Their knowledge based on their egocentricity which the masculine subjects use helps them to form stereotypes about the women instead of enabling them to welcome any unexpected response from the other.

Lacking access to a transcendental, living centre like nature or god which, as Buber observes, can operate as a unifying ground for the development of mutually supportive relation, both the masculine subject and the feminine other in Hardy’s novels fail to create room in their beings for each other. Therefore, instead of disappearing in the full exercise of any creative act or in the experience of unconditional love, they form relationships of sexual desire and love involving ceaseless conflict and struggle. Instead of displaying “mutual recognition,” with a characteristic Darwinian note, each party “wishes to dominate the other” in those relationships which is manifested in the stormy married lives in the novels (Beauvoir 727). The tragic inevitability in Hardy’s texts has been explained in terms of the functioning of “fate” or hostile social situations which is evident, for instance, in Hardy’s sensitivity to the indomitable power of heredity affecting the agency of individuals and his awareness of the social and cultural dislocation caused by emigration in the context of the process of industrialization and the
consequential ruin of the communal past. So far as the interpersonal relationship is concerned,
this sense of tragic inevitability as the dominant spirit in the novels can thus also be explained in
terms of the perpetuation of this irreconcilable conflict between the masculine subject and the
feminine other who, owing to their possessiveness, seldom behave as “permeable” selves capable
of acknowledging each other as personal centers of subjectivity (Marcel, Creative 87).