

THOMAS HARDY'S SUE BRIDEHEAD : A NEW WOMAN OF FEMINIST MOVEMENT

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Thomas Hardy—the writer like any other great artist, was ahead of his times, in the content and presentation of his writings. The strict moral code of Victorian era acted as stimulant for him to voice his dissent, dislike and discomfort through his novels. His female protagonists are the children of his turbulent mind so full of contrasting ideals, feelings and thoughts. The fact that Thomas Hardy only attempted what he could not achieve—creation of a new woman—in his writings- is the result of the overpowering nature of social and religious institutions in his times. Thomas Hardy could not set himself completely free from the side effects of orthodox culture and thinking. It is evident in the way the elements of 'fate, chance and co-incidence' play important part in his novels. All his female protagonists though show the signs of 'new woman' could not survive in the same *avatar* till the end. All of them willingly sacrifice their 'newly-found' and often bravely-fought 'identities of free woman' to altar of either religion or some social moral code.

Having said this Thomas Hardy cannot be robbed of his claim for having envisioned the possibilities of 'a new woman', even on the stark background of orthodoxy. Hardy's female characters are the ones who dared to imagine a new role for themselves, equally important to that of the men. Hardy has been rightly declared as one of the pioneers of having made his women speak the language often thought to be a taboo. In this context this paper attempts to study 'Jude the Obscure' from feministic point of view and to reread the character of Sue Bridehead in the light of the theory of 'New Woman. Thomas Hardy along with his contemporary novelists made a pioneering effort to break down sexual taboos in literature. In his novels he rejected the female literary stereotype in its oversimplified image of woman without sexual or inner conflicts. "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." (*Kramer Dale, p.98*)

Among Hardy's women characters like Susan, Bathsheba, Eustacia, Tess and Sue Bridehead one finds that 'Susan is a victim of patriarchal hegemony. Bathsheba, the farm woman, exudes the spirit of independence. Eustacia is a rebel; she rebels against

the robbed, confined and enclosed existence that her marriage with Clym means for her. Hardy's addition of a subtitle to his novel 'Tess of the D'Urbervilles' 'A Pure Woman' – was a challenge thrown at the orthodox moral code of the Victorian times. By the time he wrote the novel '*Jude the Obscure*', he was familiar with the 'New Woman' fiction, and the 'New Woman' concept. Hardy's objective in 'Jude the Obscure' was not just to make a frank depiction of sexual matters but to present a 'New Woman', by her explicit awareness of herself as a member of an oppressed sex rightly seeking autonomy.

The famous phrase that opens the second volume of '*The Second Sex*' '*One is not born but rather becomes a woman*' means that there is no pre-established female nature or essence. To a lesser or greater degree in the world particularly societies traditionally value women's reproductive capacity more than her intellectual development or autonomy means that laws, institutions and belief systems reflect this view of women's role in society. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed an upsurge of feminist activism against male domination and oppression. The new social awareness encouraged women to demand their equality with men in all spheres of life especially in social and political affairs. Thus a new movement for the emancipation of women appeared on the horizon of the firmament of English life and society like a dazzling star. Likewise in matters relating to love and sex women developed free thinking and demanded equality with men in marriage. In the field of feminism the new term 'The New Woman' was developed subsequently. This phrase is highly flexible one, used by women's supporters and others and detractors alike but, necessarily carrying implicit within it a questioning of traditional female roles. The challenge to the institution of marriage was a central part of the new woman's activities. Towards the end of the nineteenth century the emphasis fell on questions of social organizations and particularly of sexual morality and here again the 'New Woman' was building on earlier foundations. The point is of course that the New Woman's ideals were too advanced for her environment. The aim of the present research paper is to analyze Thomas Hardy's '*Jude the Obscure*' from the feministic perspective and re-read the character of Sue Bridehead in the light of the theory of 'new woman.'

According to Cunningham "In the mid-nineteenth century novel sexual misdemeanours are more usually treated as hideous aberrations and are approached with uniform gravity and a stern moral frown. The fallen woman was a stain on society and had to be punished either by the intolerable pangs of conscience or by death preferably both. Even the novelist who took the rather advanced line that many such women were victims that they did not jump but were pushed to their fall by some callous profligate could not dispense with final retribution. The ideas expressed later by some of the New Woman novelists and by Hardy and Meredith that women conventionally 'fallen' might actually have chosen their state on moral grounds would have appeared utterly incomprehensible." (Cunningham, p.21)

Women of the mid 19th century England had no such choices. Most lived in a state little better than slavery. They had little choice but to obey men because in most cases men had all the resources and women had no independent means of subsistence. A woman announcing her intention to remain single would attract social disapproval and pity. She could not have children or cohabit with a man.: the social penalties were simply too high. Nor could she follow a profession since they were all closed to women. It is only in the late Victorian novels that the new women were presented who were educated, well-read and had a shocking frankness about sex. They were against marriage as an institution for its constraining the human freedom. But the journey for these women seeking individual happiness in a society yet to awaken fully to their needs was, extremely difficult and daring.

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'. Therefore the scope of this research paper will be the single text of Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* and the paper intends to analyze Hardy's Sue Bridehead from feministic point of view focusing on New Woman's idea of feminism. Thomas Hardy's '*Jude the Obscure*' made a great tumult among the people. Even his wife advised him to stop the publication of this novel. It is his last novel but the review about the novel made Hardy quite upset. Most of the reviewers called this novel as '*Jude the Obscene*', '*Hardy the Degenerate*' and '*The Anti-Marriage League*'. The novel was banned from public libraries. Sue Bridehead is portrayed as the '*New Woman*'. As Phillip Millet writes, 'Many Victorian feminists, including many '*New women*' of the 1890s, implicitly valorized the male world by framing their demands for access to education and the professions in terms of the privileges already offered to men. Sue is more ambiva-

lent. For her Christminster is '*full of fetishist and ghost seers*.' With good reason she opposes as well as stands for 'culture' like the voices which greet Jude on his entrance to the city the books she has read represent a male tradition which has no room for her. Nor is this a merely theoretical exclusion. Her father refuses to have her in his house after she shares a flat with the Christminster graduate, and while experience and unbiased nature tell Jude to sympathetic with her unhappiness as a wife and 'instinct' persuades Phillotson, to allow her 'her freedom', both know that, as 'order loving' men pledged to uphold the 'dogmas' and 'principles' of church and state they ought to condemn her. As Arabella reminds Phillotson men have the laws on their side. 'Moses knew' (Millet Phillip, p.192)

Sue is called New Woman because she is quite different from Hardy's other heroines. Her concept of marriage is also different from these women because she has an explicit awareness of herself as member of an oppressed sex rightly seeking autonomy. Sue's final returning to the System of marriage may brand her an orthodox or stereotype heroine, but her marriage with Phillotson and her experience with him and her reaction to this are adequate to prove her as a new woman. She expresses her view about marriage by saying that "What tortures me so much is the necessity of being responsive to this man whenever he wishes. (J.the Ob., Ch.I, Part IV, P. 211)

Sue clearly attacks the relation of the husband and wife, she thinks that the institution of marriage brings limitation to the life and relationship of the husband and wife, but again it is patriarchal society that allows a man to have his dominance over his woman. She has to behave according to the whims of her husband and the male members of the family. In this connection Sue remarks that "He (husband) can spend until midnight balancing the school registers, and then muttering on about school committees and draughty ventilators he can ascend to the nuptial chambers quite as if sexual intercourse with his wife were just part of the day's functions." (Ibid p. 217) She even comments on the people's attitude about marriage, she thinks that the views of the people about the relations of man and woman are limited, as is proved by their expelling her from the school. Their philosophy only recognizes relations based on animal desire. Hardy spoke through her when she rightly points out that, 'the social moulds, civilization fits us into, and have no more relations to our actual shapes than the conventional shapes of the constellations have to the real star patterns. I am called Mrs. Richard Phillotson living a calm wedded life with my counterpart of that name. But I am not really Mrs. Richard Phillotson, but

a woman tossed about, all alone with, aberrant passions, and uncountable antipathies. (Ibid Part IV, Ch.II, p.204) The main character of this novel is Sue Bridehead, a mouthpiece of Thomas Hardy, to attack this system. Sue is a woman who has her own picks, her determination and principles of life but finally she surrenders to the social and the religious restrictions. According to Thomas Hardy due to an unhappy marriage both man and woman have to bear the misery associated with an unsuitable marriage all their life and all their ambitions of doing something in their life come to nothing.

The system of marriage always demands that man will choose the woman and there is no right for woman to choose her husband. In this connection Sue remarks that "My bridegroom chooses me of his own will and pleasure, but I don't choose him, somebody gives me to him, like a she-ass or she-goat, or any other domestic animal" (Ibid, p. 170) She is quite different from the conventional women seeking for their identity. She tries to demand the thing which has never been demanded by any woman which in the modern age has become a popular trend among the city dwellers that is 'live-in' relationship. Sue is intensely conscious of herself as a woman. Her vision is vitally particularized by the woman's point of view. Hardy seemed to ask the questions about the rules and laws of the society which are purely man made. He wished to suggest that these laws and rules should be changed as the circumstances allow. This is put in the mouth of Sue when she says to Phillotson "Domestic laws should be made according to temperament, which should be classified. If people are at all peculiar in character they have to suffer from the very rules that produce comforts in others!" (Ibid, p.220)

Sue questions the very logic behind this system of marriage; she asks, whether marriage is a religious binding or a social contract. She says "If a marriage ceremony is a religious thing it is possibly wrong, but it is only a sordid contract based on material convenience in house holding, rating and taxing, and the inheritance of land and money by children making it necessary that the male parent should be known." (Ibid, p. 208). No doubt it makes Sue realize the futility of fighting against the social taboos and so she decides to go back to Phillotson to set the things right in the traditional manner. But she does so only under the pressure of religious and social forces. It is also fate

that compels her to take this decision because her children die at the same time. After all being a mother she stoops and decides to go back to the same social norms to which she used to criticize. She is bewildered by the religious thoughts and so she considers her unconventional act as the cause for her children's death. After her final downfall she utters "We must confirm! All the ancient wrath of the power above us has been vented upon us, His poor creatures, and we must submit. There is no choice. We must. It is no use fighting against God." (Ibid, p. 337)

Sue is unconventional even in some other cases, for instance, Sue does not believe in prayer at all. She frankly tells Jude that, if she were to join him in his evening prayer, she would be acting in a hypocritical manner. Unlike Jude, Sue has no respect for Christminster whatever except to some extent on its intellectual side, and "intellect and Christminster is new wine in old bottles", she says adding that the medievalism of Christminster must go or Christminster will itself have to go. As for Jude, he thinks that Christminster has much that is glorious. She emphasizes her difference with Jude by saying that Christminster is "an ignorant place, except as to the townpeople, artizans, drunkards and paupers." (Ibid, p150) In short she behaves like Voltairian as Jude calls her (because Voltaire was frankly skeptical about Christian teaching and Christian gospels. (Ibid, p. 152)

In the words of Duffin "the most important distinctive and interesting element in her nature is certain sexlessness. And the concentrated essential perfume of this lily, the trait by which she is Sue Bridehead, is her desire for marriage without physical sex union. This alone will be sufficient to damn her at the tribunal of half humanity. The conception is, of course, not put forth in Jude the Obscure, for the first time. The term, Platonic affection has been often abused but Sue's ideal of sexless union of spirits might claim some analogy with that which Socrates and his great pupil intended by love." (Duffin, p.222)

The above traits in Sue's character clearly prove that she is a 'New Woman' who wishes to break down the conventional ways of living life. No doubt she does not get success in her attempts due to social and religious suppression. Even Hardy cannot be called a complete feminist writer because his characters though try to be unconventional, have to succumb to the pressures of the convention-bound society.

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