

“The Mayor of Casterbridge”: Attitude toward Changes and Challenges of Social Conventions.

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Abstract- The position of women in the 19th century was a critical one. The society was governed in the patriarchal mode. The public sphere was not accessible to women as it was to men. Various kinds of limitations were imposed on women's conducts especially in the fields of law, education and even on lifestyle. Again, side by side, there were various positive changes taking place around that time. For example, the Married Women's Property Act was passed in 1870 which protected the legal position of women within the family. The 19th century was also important as a time when feminist campaigns to improve the legal status of women were undertaken in areas such as vote, the family and reproduction. The family was traditionally viewed as a private zone that was largely beyond the reach of the concerns of law. The feminist campaigns, to secure equality within the family, was therefore, viewed as threat to the stability of family life. The grounds have been prepared by such writers as Mary Wollstonecraft, who argued about the position of women in her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* as early as in 1792. All these brought a new perspective in the Victorian society. In terms of all these changes, it is really interesting to see how Hardy represents the position of women through the major women characters in his novel “The Mayor of Casterbridge”.

Index Terms- Character, Women, Society, Freedom

I. INTRODUCTION

Much have been said and written about the representation of women characters in Hardy's novel. The scope of this subject is broad.

“Character is Fate” (Hardy 112), but Henchard's character demands an understanding of the other characters in relation to him, because it's not Henchard's character alone that brings in his tragic end. It's the character of the people as a whole that surround him and their responses to his life and death that probably goes up to make his fate.

In this paper, my attempt is to discuss three major women characters--- Susan, Elizabeth Jane and Lucetta Templeman. I would like to show how in these three women characters Hardy registers the trends between Victorian and modern sensibilities.

The initial impression of the opening chapter brings out Henchard's ‘bitterest temper’ (p19). He sells his wife to the sailor, Newson, in a mood of drunken frustration. The act of selling is a preparation that both Henchard and Susan has been confronting verbally long before they arrived at the Fair of Weydon-Priors. Michael has repeated this act of selling his wife verbally many times before. He has ‘talked this nonsense in public places before’ (p11), and Susan was willing to leave

‘provided she can have the child’ (p14). Michael announces it publicly in the inn:

“She said so only the other day when I talked o’it.” (Hardy 12)

Susan confirms it by saying

“I do” (Hardy p12)

But the verbal announcement and the confirmation of it when carried to the extremes, Susan says:

“Mike....I’ve lived with thee a couple of years, and had nothing but temper. No, I’m no more to ‘ee. I’ll try my luck elsewhere.” (Hardy 13) and she goes away with her daughter. Susan is apparently commodified here, but Susan's speech carries a stamp of her anguish against the treatment she received from Henchard. This can be seen as a beginning point of the novel.

Talking about Henchard's character Ian Gregor in ‘The Great web: The Form of Hardy's Fiction (1974) remarks “He (Henchard) affects the life of other characters is in making us feel they are never allowed to live and breathe apart from him” (115)

It is important to see this idea from different perspective too. Henchard is also affected by the other characters in the novel. If we note the kind of complaints that Henchard makes on several occasions. We may get a glimpse of the point I am trying to make here:

Talking to Farfrae about his mental space, he says:

“I’m a lonely man, Farfrae:

I have nobody else to speak to...” (Hardy 75)

and on a different occasion he says:

“I sank into one of those gloomy fits I sometimes suffer from, on account o’ the loneliness of my domestic life” (Hardy 76)

Echoes of such complaints run throughout the novel. We find that one of the important factors of Henchard's life is his loneliness. The point I am trying to raise is what makes Henchard to complain about his loneliness even after Susan returns with Elizabeth Jane? Or After Susan's death, Lucetta arrives at Casterbridge to marry Henchard? Why could not Henchard recover from his loneliness?

Let me begin from the moment when Susan returns with her grown up daughter Elizabeth Jane. This Susan who comes after a long gap of 18 years is a different Susan. She is no more that Susan who somewhat excitedly left Henchard 18 years ago because of his senseless announcement of selling her. She is now endowed with a personal will, feelings and aspirations. On her first meeting with Henchard right after her arrival, she says:

“O Michael!... I meet you now only as his widow. I consider myself that, and that I have no claim upon you. Had he not died I should never have come---never! Of that you may be sure.” (Hardy 71)

Her self-assertion is very remarkable. It tells so much about the changed and confident Susan. At the same time, the implicit sense of detachment that she creates between herself and Henchard that she is no more dependent on anybody even after Newson's death is mistaken by Henchard. He says:

“It's only that which makes me feel'ee an innocent woman.”(Hardy 71)

But Susan is not that innocent woman who let her husband to sell her. She is different now who goes on asserting her new strength that she has gained over the years. She also gained enough experiences to realize the attempt of intimacy shown by Henchard. She separates herself from that and says that she came to see Henchard and that she will go away with her daughter at once if he wants them to. Here we must remember that Susan's primary aim was to secure a safe shelter for her daughter and herself, and she was aware of Henchard's emotions and impulsive nature very well. Henchard, by now, recognized the new confidence in Susan. He replies to her:

“No, no Susan, you are not to go... I have thought of this plan that you and Elizabeth take a cottage in the town...that I meet you, court you and marry you..and I should have the pleasure of seeing my only child under my roof as well as my wife.” (Hardy 71)

Once she becomes assured of Henchard's politeness, then only she reveals her intention of coming to Casterbridge. She tells Henchard:

“I come here only for the sake of Elizabeth, for myself, if you tell me to leave again tomorrow morning, and never come near you more. I am content to go” (Hardy 72)

Henchard doesn't want her to go away and thus Susan secures her daughter first and then herself in the hands Henchard. Dale Kramer, in his “Thomas Hardy: The Forms of Tragedy”, discusses this turn of events from Henchard's perspective. He suggests that Henchard remarries Susan not for renewed love but because of a sense of obligation, duty and rightness. Kramer may be right in his observation, but it is also important to explore the nature of obligation and rightness on the other side, that is on the side of Susan. Susan admits that she had entered the situation solely for the sake of her daughter's reputation. She expresses her indifference to Henchard although implicitly. Henchard, on the other hand, has to bow down or come to a certain sort of compromise leaving his “rule o' thumb” (Hardy 50) status.

It is also interesting to know how Elizabeth becomes the central point of Henchard's and Susan's discussion. All precautions are taken by Henchard and Susan so that her sentiments remain unhurt. The public auctioning of Susan has now become a private matter. Henchard fights hard to keep it a secret. This becomes a responsibility on Henchard. The creation of such sensibility in Henchard is a sole credit of Susan. It is she who sows the responsibility in Henchard and keeps it alive in him through her speeches. But this sense she creates in him seems to be enveloped with a kind of selfishness which is carried to a certain extreme where Henchard's emotional need is completely forgotten. Henchard receives no or little response from Susan, except the fatal lie that Elizabeth is not his daughter,

but of Newson. But, there is no denying to the fact that Susan's primary concern was the safe future of her daughter, and moreover, we must admit that she was honest in her confession, although she deliberately reveals it late to Henchard because she wanted no harm to the sentiments and feelings of either of them.

The character of Elizabeth Jane, as Hardy describes her, is something of a prig concerned with respectability from her first appearance. When Susan appears in the scene with her daughter and goes to the furnity-woman to enquire about her past incident, Elizabeth Jane says:

“Don't speak to her—it isn't respectable” (Hardy 21) and again while getting out of the fair she remarks:

“mother ... it was hardly respectable for you to buy refreshments there, I see none but the lowest do.” (Hardy 23)

However, when later they reunite with Henchard, we are told that to Elizabeth Jane, that time was the most triumphant one. “The freedom she experienced, the indulgence with which she was treated went beyond her expectation” (Hardy 84). But Susan could not feel completely secured about her daughter's position in the hands of Henchard. So she was searching for an alternative. She found it in Donald Farfrae. She secretly writes a note to Elizabeth Jane and Donald to unite them together in Durnover Barton. Susan wanted Elizabeth Jane to marry Donald Farfrae.

Susan was partially correct in foreseeing this, because after discovering the secret of Elizabeth's fatherhood, Henchard turned indifferent and harsh toward Elizabeth Jane. Although she is not subjected to the public ridicule and mistreatment to the same extent as Lucetta; but Henchard here appears to be the main instigator of her worries. From the very beginning of Henchard's remarriage, he expects Elizabeth to behave like the daughter of a Mayor. He finds her style of handwriting not up to the mark. He assumes that since Elizabeth Jane is a female, she should write ladies'—hand. Eventually, we find that Henchard's attitude toward Elizabeth changes her. She finds solace in Lucetta Templeman, because she thinks that if she stays with Lucetta, she can enjoy the kind of freedom she craves for. She accepts Lucetta's invitation and goes to her house. She affirms her individuality when she says:

“I would do anything to be independent” (Hardy 135)

It is true that in some respect Hardy has portrayed these women characters as typical examples of women of his time, but it is interesting to see how within these conventions, he allowed his characters to display their personality against some of his norms of institutional attachments. Hardy does this by keeping Henchard fixed, in whom old values remain unchanged and the mobile characters like Susan, Elizabeth, Lucetta whose attitudes change continually towards him.

It has been argued that everyone goes away from Henchard because of his own fault or his misfortune. This is true to some extent, because right from the beginning of the novel, Henchard is shown as impulsive and inconsistent, but this impulsiveness and inconsistency clashes with Lucetta who is presented as a very ambitious woman. As she comes to know that Henchard is going to remarry Susan, she wants those letters back which she had written to him in the heat of feelings when they were in love. She considers these letters as a safeguard to make any future happiness possible to her own self. But, again, when she learns that Susan is dead, she comes to Casterbridge in order to marry

Henchard. But Lucetta, too, like Susan, has undergone a change now. She has inherited a large property from her recently deceased aunt. She is now her own mistress. This economic independence gives her a courage to alter her choice from Henchard, whom she now considers as 'hot tempered and stern' (p178) and she also thinks that it would be madness to bind herself to him. She says:

"I won't be a slave to the past—I'll love where I choose!" (Hardy 173)

But Henchard could not accept her changed attitude. He gets furious and threatens to reveal her in front of everyone, and eventually, we see her destruction, although this was not done by Henchard willingly. Talking about Lucetta's tragic end many critics observed that it was primarily Lucetta's attempt to break from the bonds of her past, and this destroys her and the attitudes of society towards her.

She could recognize the change in her which is largely because of the economic independency. She explains her situation to Henchard after she inherits the fortune:

"I was a poor girl then now my circumstances have altered so I am hardly the same person" (Hardy 191) and also because she could realize what it means to be Henchard's wife now. She says:

"Had I found that you proposed to marry me for pure love I might have felt bound now. But I soon learnt that you had planned it out of mere charity—almost as an unpleasant duty – After that I did not care for you, so deeply as before." (Hardy 191)

This shows how clearly she understands the terms of marriage. Her selection is based not on emotions but on strong judgments. It is another matter that her intimacy with Henchard, when revealed in Casterbridge, leads to her social downfall, a miscarriage and subsequently, her death.

We may take a note of Hardy's comment on "The Mayor of Casterbridge" which he made on January 2, 1886, the day when the novel began in the 'Graphic newspaper', and 'Harper's Weekly':

"..after all it is not the improbabilities of the incidents but the improbabilities of the characters that matter" (Nemesvari 60) But we find that the improbabilities in the women characters are equally evident as in the character of Henchard. In "The Mayor of Casterbridge", Thomas Hardy attempts to make Victorian society more aware of its treatment and attitude towards women and he has successfully affected this objective through the chief female characters---Susan, Elizabeth and Lucetta to a great extent. Thus by giving the place and situation, Hardy allows them

the freedom and strength to display their personal feelings, to secure themselves, and to make their own choices within the Victorian conventions.

II. CONCLUSION

Hardy, by giving the place and situation, allows them the freedom and strength to display their personal feelings, to secure themselves, and to make their own choices within the Victorian conventions. Henchard is depicted as an embodiment of traditional values and traditional man of Victorian society and he is very distinctly put against the chief female characters that represent the possibilities for women in Victorian society. The transition of the female characters from simple everyday characters of Victorian period to self conscious and responsive women shows that Hardy was aware of the shifting world- a world that was processing elements of both the Victorian and modern times. The search for an ideal relationship which was so common during Victorian age is overtly redefined from a new perspective through the major female characters.

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