

Society as a Victimizer in Thomas Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles

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Thomas Hardy's life is different to what he has written in most of his novels. He uses society as a dooming force which ruins the lives of its characters. During Hardy's time, human existence was determined by partially blind power of society and its traditional rules. Thus, people suffered to adjust the rules of the society and its views. This article shows how society makes characters victims in Tess of the D 'Urbervilles- to make characters suffer till they reach their downfall. During the Victorian era, women became victims because of the male domination. Women tried their level best to save themselves from the social abuse as a result of their negligence, seduction, purity, etc from the men's side. However, society used the concept of purity to make women victims either because of adultery, divorce, etc. Tess, who is the heroine of the novel, is the best example as she suffers a lot to prove her purity as a result of her seduction from Alec.

Tess of the D'Urbervilles is Thomas Hardy's one of the greatest pessimistic novels, published in December, 1891. One of the subject matters of this novel is society's negative attitudes towards its people. They become victims because of society's rigid rules, traditions, customs etc.

For example, when Tess is seduced by the son of her employer, She undergoes hardships to prove her chastity and regain her faith to be able to live peacefully in her society. This is because society considers her as a adulterous woman. She is not considered as a pure and chaste woman as per the rules of society. As a result, her life becomes complicated because of society as well as Alec's disastrous action.

Geoffrey Harvey writes,

"An important dimension of Tess of the D' Urbervilles is its debt to the oral tradition; to stories about wronged milkmaids, tales of superstition, and stories of love, betrayal and revenge, involving stock figures".¹

Tess of the D' Urbervilles shows Thomas Hardy's interests in the social class. The novel reflects his views about the upper and common working class during the Victorian era. It deals with pessimism because society destroys the lives of its characters. Tess suffers from the social abusing. On the contrary, Angle Clare does not suffer like Tess, though he is not a member of the working class or the upper class. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* reflects life which was torn between two different social standards. It also reflects the complications caused by the religious and social beliefs that existed during Hardy's time. Angle Clare is the best example to reflect Hardy's own experiences.

Geoffrey Harvey comments,

"Although Hardy revealed in his life that the world of Tess of D'Urbervilles was closed to his own experience as the son of a local mason, who was also a famous author and intimate of London society, his attitude to this world was ambiguous".²

Tess promotes herself to the higher level as men in the eyes of society in the Victorian era. This is because of her braveness, survival, chastity and honesty. In this novel, Hardy examines three important aspects of life. These aspects are morality, religion and inheritance. It is because of these aspects, the life of the characters become complicated and end sadly. For example, in the Victorian age the old families were noble and well-known ancestors. They used to give their family name to those who worked with them.

Tess's father is informed that he belongs to the Derbyfield family. Thereafter, Tess's life starts to be complicated when her father, *Jack* makes a party to celebrates the happy news. This is because, Jack becomes drunk and could not control his horse carriage the next morning. As a result, Tess becomes in charge of the situation. As Tess is not expert in the horse carriage control, an accident takes place and the horse dies which was the only source of her family income.

Tess becomes a murderer in the beliefs of her ancestors. The traditions and ancient rules of the Victorian society destroys Tess's life. Thus, Tess becomes victim since her ancestors have a negative attitudes towards her. Hence, they can be considered as one of the reasons of Tess's tragic plight. Consequently, Tess is forced to work and earn money for her family. She is further forced to choose the Derbyfield family for her employment and starts working as a maid in the same family.

Tess is a pure woman by heart and behavior, still, she is morally unaccepted by her society as Alec seduces and rapes her. She becomes a sinner as a result of Alec's immoral action. Instead of blaming Alec, society blames Tess and tortures her as a sinner. These complications force her to kill Alec. One complication causes another complication. Even though, she is good and innocent in her hearts and behavior, she is held responsible for the deaths of the horse, Alec, and her child and considered immoral and impure. All these complications create difficulties and sufferings in her life.

U.S. Mathur writes,

"For a pure woman to be crushed into impurity-there is a soul's of tragedy".

The social rules during the Victorian era were against those who used to indulge in a sexual act before getting married. It is of course a contradictory system which ruins people to their downfall. The people who follow these rules of morality is not serious to find out the problem makers. For example, Alec who is a real sinner is not accused as a victimizer. On the contrary, Tess becomes a victim as she defends herself from the social abuse. In fact, Tess should not be considered an impure woman. Society blindly follows the rules of morality and innocent individuals like Tess are crushed. In fact, the social rules which become responsible for Tess's suffering should be blamed and not Tess. Thus, society victimizes Tess cruelly and inhumanity.

Wife's working and supporting the family during the Victorian era was financially, traditionally and morally unacceptable. It is the responsibility of the husband to take care of his wife physically and emotionally. Tess faces problems to adjust in her life after she gets married with Angle. When Angle Clare marries Tess, she informs him about her past with Alec. Angle becomes angry and leaves Tess confide in her impurity. Social rules related to the marriage institution become responsible for the downfall of the characters. Angle decides to leave Tess after getting married. He gives Tess little money to save her life. Hence, the constitution of marriage and Tess's poverty victimizes her inhumanity.

David Daiches writes,

"Angle Clare is a much worse character than Hardy seems to recognize, while the chain of circumstances that produce the murder with the inevitable hanging of Tess at the end of the novel seems altogether too contrived".⁴

Social circumstances creates its obstacles in the way of its people. For example, Angle Clare decides to leave Tess, even though he once traps a woman and lives with her for forty-eight hours. As a result, Tess spends winter time on a farm which is very far away from her home to save herself from the social abuses. Thereafter, Tess is forced by circumstances to return to Alec to claim his assistance as she is caught in a critical condition after Angel's rejection. This shows how social circumstances prove to be harsh and cruel towards Tess. She was not willing to commit an immoral act, but she was helpless before her master. Social circumstances force her to listen to her master and becomes a victim and undergo suffering in her later life. Tess tries to seek Alec's help. Alec cleverly puts her in a shameful position and keeps himself served and safe from the social abuses. He poses to love her thinking that he could take advantages of her helplessness to seduce her again and dose it accordingly.

Thomas Hardy opposes the rigid and strict religious rules through most of his novels. He reinforces the pure and easy religious rules than the complicated one. Angle Clare is Hardy's best example to represent the immorality of religion. He refers to the sense of inhumanity which is clearly proved in *Tess of the D' Urbervilles*. Angle Clare is the son of a clergyman who grows up in a fully religious atmosphere. He dreams to be a perfect religious man. So, he follows the strict rules of religion and philosophy. Angle Clare is rejected by Tess when he asks her to marry him, as he follows his parents' words in his life. So, he could not justify his subject matter with her. He even could not find a clear justification to his gloomy, as he and his parents strictly follow the traditions and religious rules of society. Finally, Angle Clare suffers to adjust with the social rules and traditions of the society especially when he discovers that Tess is not virgin after their marriage. Therefore, he becomes a victim because of the social complicated rules of the society. Finally, Angle Clare leaves Tess to save himself for the social abuses. As a result, Angle Clare destroys Tess's life as he leaves her in the jaw of social circumstances.

Alec D' Urbervilles becomes a preacher in the low church movement. He confesses before Tess that he is fully reformed and wants her to forgive him and return back to him. In fact, he still looks at Tess sexually. For example, when he sees Tess again, he immediately leaves the church to pursue her sexually. This shows hypocrisy on Alec's part. He is a preacher in the low church movement and society judges men and women by applying the religious and social rules.

Tess trusts Alec again. As an innocent woman, she discloses her marriage with Angle Clare and the story of her child to Alec. In addition to this, she accepts his request to marry her again. Alec destroys Tess's life by telling her wrong things. He confesses to Tess that her first husband, Angle Clare, leaves her forever. He further tells her that even if he returns back, she should not look upon him as a husband. Alec's deceitful act is one of the reasons behind Tess's downfall. Finally, Angle Clare comes back to claim Tess as his wife. She discovers the truth of Alec's deception and stapes him on his heart. Alec becomes victim because of his hypocrisy. However, Tess's life comes to an end as a result of Alec's immoral deceitful attitude towards her.

Geoffrey Harvey comments,

"Both Alec and Angel regard her as an object of desire, and she becomes their victim, violated by Alec and later abandoned by her husband. Alec assumes her compliance, while Angle fits her into his Romantic preconceptions of nature".⁵

The members of the churches are responsible to some extent to destroy the life of its people in the Victorian era. For instance, Parson Tringham, one of the members of the churches, is one of the problem makers in Tess's life. Because of Parson Tringham, the news of the D' Urbervilles family ancestors come to its reality. As a result, this occasion brings the disastrous meeting between Tess and Alec.

Hence, Tess becomes victim as a result of her seduction by Alec. Therefore, Parson who represents the social standards of the society causes Tess's downfall.

Some of the people during the Victorian era become victims as a result of the negative attitudes of others. Some of the preachers paint a damning of the biblical texts on the fence of one of the churches. This indicates the weak theology which is followed by the people. It shows the negative attitudes of people towards life. Such kind of negative attitudes affect religious- minded people to keep them away from religious activities. When Tess was pregnant, she wanted to visit the church. Soon, she feels heart sick and decides not to come to the church again because the parishioners look negatively of her pregnancy. Tess suffers from the social abuse even in the church which is supposed to be the holy and secured place for her. As a result, she becomes victim because of society which is supposed to help her during her difficulties.

Tess becomes victim again because of the social rules of the Victorian era. This is because when she returns home after the employment of Angle Clare. She discovers that the grave of her baby is covered by small tress and grace. She decides to clean the grave of her baby to make it visible. In the meanwhile, some of the scrupulous see Tess nearby. They accuse her as adultery as they remember her past sin with Alec. Tess and her family evict from home as a result of Tess's sin which is actually committed by Alec himself.

Tess and her family members become victims as a result of the wrong religious beliefs of the people of the Victorian society. It is obviously clear that the rigid and strict rules of the church of the Victorian era is one of the causes in making its people victimize each other.

Thomas Hardy shows how the false institutions deceive people applying rigid and strict rules of the churches. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* mainly deals with social problems of the Victorian era. It teaches the readers a great lesson of perceiving the truth behind the hypocrisy of the rules of the churches which were followed by the people of the Victorian era. Finally, Thomas Hardy clearly shows the hypocrisy of the society in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* through the medium of his characters such as; Tess, Angel Clare, Alec and others. Hence, society becomes the main reason behind the destruction of the life of its people like Tess and others.

The plight of the protagonist relates largely to Alec, who is Tess's major problem maker. Because of him Tess's social life becomes completely complicated. Alec becomes a dominant role in Tess's life. He represents the high rank of hypocrisy as he belongs to the high class in the Victorian society. He also represents the cruelty of society because he shows no moral or remorse when he seduces Tess, though such kind of mistake is a taboo in the Victorian society. Thus, Tess's sin is caused by Alec's immoral actions. Therefore, Tess and her family become Alec's victims and suffer from social criticism. Tess keeps her morals, her innocence and beauty in spite of her seduction by Alec.

Still, she is one to be blamed partially for the sin committed by Alec because she is matured enough to discover her identity as a woman. At the same time, her mother has to be blamed as she does not teach her what the wicked can men do with women.

Martin Seymour Smith observes,

"Tess could indeed have avoided her fate. She could have told Angle of her laps when she first felt impelled to do so. But that would have been calculating, and therefore a breaking of faith".⁶

Tess's baby dies, because Alec's refuses to take care of him and his mother. Alec becomes the main reason behind the death of his child from Tess. When Tess asks the priest's for his help to bury her baby according to the Christian rituals, she is prohibited by the strict social rules. The priest discovers the truth of how the baby has come to this life. The priest follows the rigid social laws of the church. Consequently, he becomes one of the victimizers of Tess- Tess and her baby become victims due to Alec's cruel and immoral action of seducing Tess and the rigid and harsh social traditions.

Tess gets a job as a milkmaid in a large farm in Flintcomb-Ash, she meets Angle Clare and immediately falls in love with him. Soon, they decide to get married. Tess refuses to tell Angle Clare her past story with Alec- she fails to do so. This is because she fears of losing Angle Clare. Harsh social rules destroys Tess's happiness again. Angle Clare discovers the truth of Tess's seduction, he leaves her alone. This is because he feels that he is been deceived by Tess. At the same time, he tries to save himself from the social abuses. It is also because Angle Clare is a religious man. He considers Tess's sin not only against man but also against God. It is the hypocrisy of men of the Victorian society which makes men to victimize women through their negative dominating and wicked attitudes toward them.

Men of the Victorian society consider women as the weaker. In fact, it was the duty of the society to take care of the women's rights. However, women have been treated negatively by considering them as having weakness in their sexual desires. This becomes clear through the behaviors of Alec and Angle towards Tess. Both the characters look upon Tess as she taints with sexual desire since it is taboo according to the social laws of the Victorian society. Thus, society victimizes Tess as she is its products. Angle Clare, who is an educated noble religious man from a high class family, is also a product of this society. Angle is aware of Tess's sin and society's impending criticism. He refuses to be with Tess as society will degrade him. Thus, Tess becomes victim of Angle's rejection and rigidity of male dominating environment existing during the Victorian society, men's negative and sexual attitude towards women and the rigid, harsh social rules applied only to women make Alec seduce Tess and spoil her purity.

Tess's purity is a purity of heart and not of body. Thomas Hardy describes her as a bird caught in a trap. This means that she has no immoral intentions behind her seduction by Alec. Existing male domination, men's sexual attitude towards women and the rigidity and harshness of the social rules towards women victimize tender innocent and helpless individuals like Tess and others.

Geoffrey Harvey comments,

"Tess is not simply presented as a passive victim, However, throughout the novel she is shown as experiencing tension between the intractable materiality of the social and economic world in which she has to live, and her extraordinarily vulnerable, sensitive self".⁷

Finally, Tess thinks to put an end to her suffering by wishing to die like the wounded pheasants. Once Tess sees a wounded pheasants when she used to travel in the countryside. Tess could not bear the suffering of wounded pheasants left by the hunters. She decides to snap their necks by her hands. Similarly, Tess wishes the same death when she is captured by the police as she kills Alec.

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