



Ecocriticism in Thomas Hardy's Wessex: A critical study of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

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Abstract— Thomas Hardy is a popular writer and a masterful reporter of rural life. As a skilled creator of a host of interesting characters, he presents a pessimistic view of the universe. His 'Wessex' is a reflection of Dorset, south west coast of England, where he was born and reared. Hardy's Wessex is partly real and partly a dream country. As a regional writer his genius lies in imparting it a universal appeal and giving it a realistic spirit. This paper explores Hardy's engagement with nineteenth century ideas and will look into the contemporary debate about 'sustainability'. Hardy's belief of 'interconnectedness' that binds human beings and ecology finds full expression in his novels. He is suspicious of the advancement of modern civilization. As far as Wessex is unaffected by modernistic ideas, the natives are happy in their backwardness, poverty and simplistic living. But as the sophisticated people bring technology and machines in the town they disturb the even tenor of simple life. This disrupts the harmony between his characters and the landscape, leading to tragic ends. His belief of 'one -great network' recognizes the interdependency of life and ecology. The paper will explore how his imaginative realization represents this 'collectivity' in his novels.

Keywords— Hardy, Wessex, Collectivity, Sustainability, ecological thought Ecocriticism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Cheryll Glotfelty from the USA proposed it as the "earth-centered approach" in her book *The Ecocriticism Reader*. The term has a rooted history and was coined by William Rueckert in 1978. According to Glotfelty, this concept referred to the complex intersections between environment and culture, believing that "human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it". The term was also used by Garrard to refer to the scope of Ecocriticism. He elaborated it by saying that "The "challenge for Ecocritics is keep[ing] one eye on the ways in which 'nature' is always [...] culturally constructed, and the other on the fact that nature really exists" (Garrard 10).

Talking about the interconnectivity of life, similar to critical traditions examining gender and race, Ecocriticism deals with the socially-constructed holistic entity- the environment. It often includes dichotomous categories that

are not only created for reality, but with reality itself. Literature is a replica of life and life inspires new ideas which bring the throbbing life in action through words. Garrard in his study points out to the different tropes to this concept which exist in many works of British and American Literature. Relying on the ontological argument of ecology that everything is connected to everything else, ecocriticism seeks to study what John Bennet symbolically calls, "a multiorganismic concept". That is, to create "an image or idea of human ecology, Gaia, the organismic Earth, the universe or God" (1996:356-357).

II. DISCUSSION

2.1 Literature and Nature

The relationship of man with nature is a common theme of all writers from ancient time till the present age. Kalidas, Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Hardy are some of the writers who have presented nature in its various moods.

The interconnectedness of life in its biotic and abiotic forms cannot be easily segregated. 'Life and environment is one' is a belief also suggested by Buddhist studies. Even the historical connection to belief systems derived from eastern religion, such as Taoism and Buddhism refer to nature as a living entity which has a crucial bearing on the living. Thus, Life and environment cannot be separated and this further highlights the importance of interconnectedness of man with nature. The discussions on Green Studies, Environmentalism and Ecocriticism has brought a multidisciplinary focus to the problems of the present century. Looking at the modern ecological crisis of the century, an urgent need to revisit nature with a more conscious approach is felt so that sustainability of all life forms can be attained.

Garrard in his study further highlights how literature encompasses every angle of nature like the dichotomy between urban and rural life, idealization of deep pastoralism and the demonization of the urban. Many a times, literature shows nature as a 'retreat' from city life. Many writers have romanticized rural life and have felt nostalgic about the non-complexity of country life. Writers have shown wilderness replete with various emotions that overpower human beings. The present scope of the study also hints to the symbiotic relation that exist between characters of Hardy and nature. This approach examines the ways in which wilderness is constructed, valued, and engaged. Thus, Green studies, environmentalism and ecocriticism as concepts are related to protecting the environment from the exploitation of man's greed.

2.2 Hardy as a Naturalist

Thomas Hardy an English Novelist and a Victorian realist was born in 1840. He was highly critical of the changing patterns of Victorian society, especially of the declining status of rural people in Britain. He carved a niche for himself in the glorious mansion of English novel by writing fourteen great novels. As a delineator of human beings pitted against the vast forces of nature, he stands supreme in his art. He is also considered as a superb craftsman for his unique ability in handling plots, situations and settings. He writes with great zeal about his countryside and its inhabitants in a serious manner. Critics have an opinion that there is no other novelist who can render the sights and smells of the countryside with such evocative sensuousness as does Hardy.

2.3 Hardy's Wessex

His Wessex is partly real and partly a dream country. As a regional writer his genius lies in imparting it a universal appeal and giving it a realistic spirit. This critical study explores Hardy's engagement with nineteenth century ideas in terms of sustainability in his novels and in his

imaginative realism. He even associated this metaphysical reality to nature. Hardy's concept of metaphysic was indeed an attempt to formulate a relation between the seen and the unseen that would provide comfort to his disillusioned heart which was suffering due to changing moralities. Life according to him was constantly in flux and it was an inexhaustible tale of suffering which humans were forced to face. He also believed that the whole 'Cosmos' was spiritually interconnected, interlinked and even interdependent. He was profusely aware of man's place in the Cosmos, his own origin, his relation with the creator of the universe, his reciprocal relation with the creator of the universe and this inspired him to develop a spiritual bond with nature.

Hardy grew up in a period of shifting emphasis in literature and in science. Many social, economic and political changes also occurred during his early youth. Some changes added progress and some brought anxiety, doubt and pessimism. This shaped his understanding and also gave a pessimistic colour to his personality. The First Reform Bill of 1832, followed by Factory Act in 1833 showed the changing scenario of economic and social life. '*Tess of the D'Urbervilles*' became one of his best works to lament the plight of the poor and the gradual rise of corruption in society. He documented his first-hand experience of this reality in his imaginative Wessex.

III. ANALYSIS

Nature, Environment and Character

Born in Upper Bock, Hampton, almost all of Hardy's narratives have a flavour of the local customs and culture of this part of England in them. Wessex, though a semi-fictional landscape, becomes an integral part of his work and the geographical descriptions provide a realistic countrified backdrop against which his characters face their destinies. His accurate portrayal of nineteenth-century rural society in Dorset presents a microcosm of human life. He presents a universal condition of human existence through 'Wessex' of his novels. Moreover, he establishes a reciprocal relationship between environment and character; an interaction which serves to demonstrate the changing morality and standards in Victorian Society. In his world, nature and human beings coexist but the control is in the hands of nature. He removes the sense of authority from the hands of humans and places humans in a subordinate role with the natural world that are in constant contact, mingling and connected, and therefore 'Wessex' becomes a mirror of the realities faced by rural life.

As Birch has commented 'Hardy's choice of Wessex "reflects his primary interest in examining the nature of

the relationship between man, the community and the environment" (Birch 352). Hardy's love of the natural world and representation of man's struggle to survive in an indifferent world are among his best quests that make him a key modernist writer as well. Most of his titles show his love for nature like *The Woodlanders* (1887), *Greenwood Tree* (1872), *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874). He introduces nature so closely in his novels that nature itself becomes a character, it dominates the plots and determines the entire action in the story. It even has life, it feels, it lives, it grows, it fears and also it has the power to dominate and generate fear in the weak.

IV. CRITICAL APPROACHES

Timothy Morton, a professor at Rice University, Houston, Texas advocated the idea of 'ecological thought'. He argued that all life forms were connected in a vast, entangling mesh. This interconnectedness penetrated all dimensions of life. No being, construct or object could exist independently from the ecological entanglement. Even 'Nature could not exist as an entity separate from the uglier or more synthetic element of life'. Not only this, he even advocated a profound philosophical, political, and aesthetic interconnectedness. Through this concept of 'Ecological thought' he explored an emerging awareness of ecological reality in an age of global warming. This study reconsiders the work of Thomas Hardy in the light of Timothy Morton's concept of 'the ecological thought' and links this discussion to contemporary debates about 'Sustainability' and also further to 'Sustainable Development'. Hardy also believed in this 'interconnectedness' that brought human beings and ecology closer to each other. He was a supporter of rural, agricultural simple life. He was suspicious of the advancement of Modern civilization. As far as 'Wessex' is unaffected by modernistic ideas, the natives are happy in their backwardness, poverty and simple life. But as the sophisticated people bring technology and machines in the town they disturb the even tenor of simple life. This disrupts the harmony between his characters and the landscape, leading to tragic ending for the characters. His belief of 'one-great network' recognises the interdependency of life and ecology'. Through his imaginative realism he represents the collectivism of man and nature in his novels. He passionately believes community life can be a selfish way of life but when the concept of 'collectivism' in life is understood each living entity becomes a part of the bigger universe. Thus Nature is a living form in his novel reacting, controlling and even directing the life of his characters

4.1 Sustainability- a looming question?

Dixon elaborated in his study that 'terms like Ecology, 'nature' and 'environment' have been used interchangeably throughout the history of modern environmentalist discourse because of the similar contents they share' (Dixon 6). It is said that Victorian writers were incorporating ideas that defined ecology just as Hardy was trying to find out a symbiotic relationship between man and nature. In fact, he has even been called proto-ecocritical author because of his concern and analysis of land-man-relationship as commented by John Parham in his essay - "*Was There a Victorian Ecology?*" (158). Adding further to this thought even Birch in his study explained that Hardy choose Wessex as it helped him to portray his characters in environment which was 'a part of the ecology of the chosen area' (Birch 353). He was considered as a keen seer because he had created a place that was a 'living element' that was comprehensive and universal in man's life. Furthermore, 'Wessex' seemed to portray 'Hardy's conscious scepticism about progress and his hostility to Victorian ideas' that he mostly depicted and valued in nature (Pite 113).

In addition to this, Hardy's nature is the main player in the game of coincidence and becomes the cause of human melodrama. He just does not embroider a beautiful background in his novels but it is always with a picture of a painful man, who is in the centre of the story. Moreover all natural descriptions have emotional connection with events happening in the story. Keeping his main characters at the pivot he makes nature appear as larger than life in his works. In *Tess of the D'Urberville's* when Clare got up in the morning after having decided to desert Tess, he finds the morning colored almost with the same intention. The feeling of dejection and disapproval is already surrounding the entire environment. Emotions become the attitude of nature.

4.2 Tess versus Nature

'Tess of the D'Urberville's' is the perfect culmination of Hardy's artistic representation of the duality in the natural world. When the novel ends, the reader is left with a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness. Tess, who is the protagonist has fought a grim and deadly battle against nature that acts as an antagonist. Quite interestingly, the story of suffering of Tess is not hers alone. It becomes the epitome of the suffering of all humanity, in fact it is the cycle of human destiny, the cycle in which man comes out as the inevitable loser. However hard the sufferings man has combated, he can never win against nature. This gives the tragedy a more sombre shade throwing humans out of the cycle of control. Moreover, Hardy's description of the scenes of nature are highly evocative. For instance the seduction scene of nature instigates romance and sentiments but it does nothing to relieve the suffering of

the young girl. With evocative descriptions of sensualism, the suffering that is waiting to fall in the lap of Tess is not reduced:

Darkness and silence ruled everywhere around. Above them rose the primeval yews and oaks of the chase, in which were poised gentle roosting of birds in the last map. But 'where was Tess's guardian angel? Where was the providence of her simple faith may be he was sleeping, and not to be awakened.

She struggles through all these scenes, as a young girl who is lost and overwhelmed by environmental circumstances, most of the time a victim of an ordered, planned universe where she must ultimately die. The reader feels cheated at the end of the story as the protagonist does not overturn her suffering even after continuous bouts of difficulties. This pathetic representation further highlights how man is a mere puppet in the hands of the natural order. 'Tess' is shown as an embodiment of the idea that man's course is determined, not by his actions on earth, but by a greater, unknown force; Tess's world is no different from the other heroines of Hardy. She moves from tone of sadness, to bitterness and then discouragement and finally to tragedy. It is she who faces violence at different levels. Olga Velez Caro describes different elements of violence as presented in the novel-- domination as violence, limitation as violence, marginalization as violence—and claims that women and nature suffer violence in these various forms as profoundly as they do its physical manifestations.

Nature is depicted in all its forms; ordinary, grand, sad, happy, evil, devilish, and angelic. It is not always in its holy, romantic or nurturing form. The macabre and demonic shades of nature come to life in the descriptive scenes of the novel. It acts as a 'villain' for Tess and has nothing good to offer to her. Nature intensifies its cruelty in the form of Alec. It is Alec who exploits the innocence of Tess, through his lustful and wanton nature. Even the seduction scene shows how nature supports Alec to commit this hideous deed. She reaches a place that has a romantic atmosphere and then she is seduced. Hardy's nature treats humans as insignificant insects:

As Flies to Wanton boys,

Are we to the gods

They kill us for their sport.

Symbolically also, Tess becomes a metaphor of the exploited land in the hands of human greed. Just as materialism of the human beings has led to the encroachment and destruction of the pure and pristine lands of nature, so is the purity of Tess misused and

manhandled. Another metaphor is of violence in the actions of Angel, who abandons Tess. It is also as painful as rape committed by Alec.

Through the tragedy of Tess, Hardy talks of the universal tragedy of man pitted against the natural force. He shows that it is nature that controls man and finally man is reduced to nothingness. Thus a conscious awareness of the interconnected living has to be derived in man's psyche if he wants to live happily in communion with nature. Elaborating it further, If Tess's body is the natural world, Angel is the distant and ineffective intellectual element while Alec is the machinery of capitalist industrialization. Their desire to own/misuse her body leaves her vulnerable to emotional and physical harm. It is through her own act of uncivilized violence can she gain a sense of retribution—even then, only against her physical assailant. But her psychic and mental suffering is in no way being reduced. In spite of all this, Hardy gives no guarantee of a bright future for Tess. Instead the last remark in the novel reiterates the tragedy waiting for Tess:

Meanwhile the trees were as green as before; the birds sang and the sun shone as clearly now as ever. The familiar surroundings had not darkened because of her grief, nor sickened because of her pain. She might have seen that what had bowed her head so profoundly—the thought of the world's concern at her situation—was founded on an illusion. She was not an existence, an experience, a passion, a structure of sensations, to anybody but herself.

In the background of a large –scale perspective, Tess appears as an insignificant entity. This identity is not just of Tess alone, this is what is true for the whole species of humans and they appear as a miniscule percentage of the planet's story. Nature as depicted by Hardy, seems to share the feelings of Man as a whole, yet it remains indifferent to his suffering. It is against the background of the vast universe that the drama of human life is enacted in Hardy's novels. Most of the time it is in the presence of this Spirit of nature that the tragedy of his heroes and heroines takes place. Showcasing the wilderness, Hardy presents the vast elemental forces, acting against the tragic facts and human existence. As a tragic writer, Tragedy is no doubt Hardy's forte. He presents man's struggle and suffering in the face of a hostile universe, and ultimately encountering defeat and death at the hands of fate and circumstances. **Tess** becomes the embodiment of the irony of life. He reflects the loss of faith in religion, contemporary disgust and the shattering Victorian morality in his works like in *The Return of the Native* and *The Woodlanders*, elements of gloom and despair abound and despair intensifies with the death of the central character. Hardy grew pessimistic and he adopted a belief in an impersonal fate which becomes

the central theme in most of his novels. He had great disgust for the modern life and civilization. He believed that it was the greedy advancement in science that became the cause of the violent character of human.

V. CONCLUSION

By employing the technique of making man subservient to nature Hardy restricted the scope of human endeavour and gave more power to chance, accident, coincidence and malignant fate in his novels. He made his human being struggle, pushing them to predestined tragic lives. His characters become the mouthpiece for the expression of his philosophy of life. Instead of discussing the psychological complements of his characters he shows the struggle between the characters and the indifferent universe. He justifies the pain of man by questioning why man is in conflict with the laws of nature. He portrays the duality of nature as filled with beauty and grace along with ugliness and cruelty. Nature, to Hardy, is the outside world of grass, animals, sunlight, and flowers. It is also the external world of sombre majesty – both evil and breathtaking. Nature becomes a definite instrument in Hardy's novels – an instrument chosen to mark the sad progress of man's brief stay on earth. Also it assumes an impressive, scrutinizing face when man acts and then it is an impartial observer to whom man is almost always subservient.

Thus, the conclusion of this study is that through most of his novels Hardy has believed in a life that is in coordination with nature. It seems as long as the characters are in sync with the nurturing energy of nature, they can bask in happiness and enjoy the beauties and bounties of nature but as humans lose their innocence and purity, the forceful elements of nature opens an evil umbrella over them, leading them to suffer, endure pain and finally meet their tragic ends. The only solution to get rid of this suffering seems to live a life which has a more conscious utilization of natural resources. It also means to lead a life which connects to rural life and does not disconnect to pure nature, giving way to all the selfish ulterior motives. Hardy seems to be advocating through all his works that it is only in the mutual interconnectedness that humans can lead a sustainable future.

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