Women in Victorian Society as Depicted in Thomas Hardy’s Novels

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Research paper presented in partial fulfillment of the condition for submission of Doctoral thesis to Singhania University.

Victorian women were rarely offered fresh active fictions bearing imaginative possibilities of challenge. The tales of discovery, of travel, of work, of exploration, were men’s stories. In Hardy’s Wessex world the sphere is broadened yet kept well within the range of plausibility and possibility. Women work outside the home in both conventional and unconventional occupations: from teaching to negotiating the price of corn, from serving as barmaids to inaugurating telegraphic system, from working as milkmaids to organizing public readings. Women travel unaccompanied beyond the neighbourhood, embark upon enterprises of their own volition, initiate relationships. In other words, they struggle to shape their lives with a vigour and energy. The more remarkable fact is that they struggle against all odds, a struggle in a world that, as Hardy says in The Return of the Native, is not friendly to women.

Hardy sets at odds those social and literary conventions which reinforced the culturally based induction in Victorian England, of a sexual ‘amnesia’ in women. From infancy women were kept in ignorance of their own bodies to experience puberty, defloration and sexual intercourse as mystery. Hardy’s women toil and labour, the physical reality of exhaustion leaves woman as it leaves man. Hardy begins where the majority of Victorian novelists left off, with real, flesh-and-blood women; and he begins with radical verve: the soiled and soiling world of work was not, as Victorians argued, a suitable place for noble womankind. In the same radical spirit, Hardy not only acknowledges to female volatile emotions, female sensations, but he also treats them with the same devotion to physical detail as he gives to the male.

Women and the law in Victorian England
‘By marriage the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or
legal existence of the woman is suspended during her marriage…¹

This system of coverture underpinned the laws of Victorian England so far as they related to married women. In effect, a woman surrendered her legal existence on marriage.

**Property**

On marriage, the control of woman’s real property and income from woman’s real property, that is, property held in the form of freehold land, passed under common law to her husband, though he could not dispose of it without her consent. Her personal property, that is, money from earnings or investments, and personal belongings such as jewellery, passed absolutely into his control.

**Divorce**

Before the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 divorces could only be obtained in England through a cumbersome process. It involves a suit by the husband against another man for ‘criminal conversation’, then an ecclesiastical divorce which did not allow the right of re-marriage, can take place. The 1857 Act was designed (in effect) to allow moderately wealthy men to divorce their wives. A woman could be divorced on the simple grounds of her adultery (her adultery threatened his ability to pass his property to his male heirs), whereas a woman had to prove adultery aggravated by desertion (for two years), or by cruelty, rape, sodomy, incest or bigamy. The husband could claim damages against the adulterous third party, the wife could not. There was no provision for consensual divorce. So the divorce granted Jude and Sue in Jude the Obscure would have been invalid since they were not adulterous; and they would have been in breach of the law in allowing it to be supposed that they were.

The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1878 allowed a less costly judicial separation but without the right of re-marriage. This Act promised maintenance to the woman separated from her husband in a case of assault, triggered off discussions on various marriage problems including neglect or simple incompatibility. Mona Caird wrote profusely about the marriage debate in several of her articles. For her, marriage was “an established system of restriction” where “the victims are expected to go about perpetually together, as if they were a pair of carriage horses”²

The Victorian society held rigid ‘views on marriage’ and the role of women in life. Most women regarded marriage as a fixed fact of nature. It was a fundamental part of their life plan, as was childbearing. In the mid 19th century, reproduction was considered a woman’s only correct occupation. Marriage and divorce legislation regulated the relations between men and women. Under the common law doctrine,

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²Mona Caird. “Marriage”. Quoted from Jenni Calder’s Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction. 166
when a woman married, she lost her independent legal personality as a femme sole (single woman) and became a femme couvert (covered woman). Men could divorce their wives solely on the grounds of adultery, but women were forced to show proof of cruelty and other sort of infidelity. Divorce was very expensive, only available to the rich. People most often simply lived apart or separated from one another. The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1923 equalized the grounds for divorce by allowing woman to sue an adulterous husband for divorce.

In the middle of this strict social code, Hardy came into being. He had a very distinct view of the institution and the implications that came along with it. He felt that it was absurd to force two people to vow to love each other forever and even if that did not happen, the couple was socially required to stay together. Hardy was not so much against marriage as he was against the idea that it was an irrevocable contract. He points out that Tess of the D’urbervilles deals in the inequities women face and their serious consequences for the sex. Sense and Sensibility deals with the full spectrum of gender issues, while approaching the gendered system as posing problems for both male and female lovers, and Wuthering Heights seeks to transcend gender within love altogether.

The women in Jane Austen’s novels offer a clear representation of the 19th century women. Austen refuses these women any sexual expression and focuses more upon their concern with marriage and society. Hardy resists Austen’s socially accepted depiction of the female with his radically independent heroines. Hardy redefines the role of women in his novels, focusing on sexuality. By emphasizing the physical aspect of femininity in his unorthodox representation of the sexual female, Hardy threatens the Victorian model of women. In an age that placed a high value on reticence, self-restraint, and certain feminine qualities such as delicacy of health, a retiring disposition, a physical and intellectual timidity, and so forth. Hardy’s women, with their admixture of qualities—transcending the stereotypes of madonna and whore—must have confused many readers caught with mixed feelings of admiration and alarm. Indeed, for removing the paragon from her pedestal and for raising the fallen woman from the gutter, for presenting humanly imperfect but lovable heroines, Hardy was, charged with misrepresenting womankind. Hardy abhorred what he called the ‘perfect woman in fiction’. On the contrary, his heroines’ best faculties are presented in the context of their less-than-perfect natures in a less-than-perfect world. The ‘prosaic reality’ in Far From the Madding Crowd, where two aspiring farmers rise to prosperity but only the female contender is denied legal rights and privileges, constitutes a primary motif modulating into a dominant theme in the darker work of Jude the Obscure.

Hardy was moving in a completely different direction. Early on in his career he had studied, taken notes and made diagrams of, Charles Fourier’s work. Hardy was deeply opposed to the liberal feminist’s idealization of marriage. The lone anti-marriage campaigner, as embodied in Sue Bridehead, arrives late on the scene in

Charles Fourier, 1772-1837, French revolutionary utopian socialist philosopher. He also believed in free sexual relationships.
Hardy’s novels, she is nascent in earlier incarnations of his more dissident, rebellious women. Bathsheba’s views on marriage, while more tentative than Sue’s, spring from a shared ideology and shared feminine consciousness which hotly denounces the notion that marriage should be the expressed goal of a woman’s sexuality. Yet critical opinion does not favour Hardy, who as critics’ point of view, would disrupt the community, the social order, the status quo. These disruptive women evidently unsettle more worlds than their own, and Hardy stands firmly behind them. From Elfride’s embattled sexual confrontations with Knight to Sue’s outrage at the notion that a married woman should be regarded as man’s property, Hardy’s platform remains consistent.

Mid-to-late-Victorian medical theorists held that all serious discussion of female sexuality should properly be confined to the medical journals where, under the heading of pathological disorder, it would be addressed in terms of malfunction. It would be twenty years or so before he could openly declare himself, in Tess, an opponent of the league of medical theorists, an opponent of the prevailing sexual ethic, and an opponent of the sexual double-standard. In Candour of English Fiction (1890), Hardy, arguing against Victorian literary conventions, complained that there were only two courses open to him. Either he produced in his characters, ‘the spurious effect of their being in harmony with social forms and ordinances’ or, ‘by leaving them alone to act as they will, he must bring down the thunders of respectability upon his head’.

His first heroine, Cytherea Graye, in Desperate Remedies is not drawn into any form of ‘defiance’. On the contrary, she is a thoroughly orthodox creation. She is, in her stereotypical ordinariness rare in the Hardy canon. The Pair of Blue Eyes is his first thunderbolt in the line of his unconventional, voluptuous heroines, the first of his ‘misrepresentations’ of womanhood. Elfride Swancourt is no iconic Victorian maiden awaiting self-definition through male endowment: the marriage tie and its award of a man’s name, identity, economic standing and status. Sexual development, exploration and understanding present themselves to Elfride, urged by an increasing awareness of her own psycho-sexual needs, to be of primary importance to her growth to maturity and fulfillment. If, then, we are drawn to her, identify and sympathise with her, this is not so much because she is struggling to gain the love of a good man, but because she is strong and weak, brave and fearful, headstrong and vulnerable: she is utterly human and we care for her.

Problems arise for Hardy because he too cares for her. For, according to prevailing views, her moral and intellectual seriousness should be undone by her sexiness. She is not only sexually instigative, then, where the male is less so, she also sets the pace. Stephen, we are told, is not men enough for her, and Knight’s fastidiousness opens up the question, in Elfride’s mind, of his virility. This reversal of roles blatantly transgressed convention and openly subverted the ethical codes of the culture.

Again, in The Return of the Native, Eustacia combines the strength of a man with the beauty of a woman. Hardy creates an unconventional woman antagonized by the desires of passionate love and the independence of a male. Her passionate craze to get love from not a single lover but from many, is not only against the moral codes but it
is also subversive. A similar conflict occurs in Tess. In her defiance of the Victorian ideal, Tess is empowered and strengthened. This passionate sexuality also results in her isolation from society and ultimately her death. Probably Hardy’s most challenging rejection of ‘Victorian dichotomy’ was to give Tess the subtitle “A Pure Woman’. This little phrase caused a great scandal, for Tess bears a child out of wedlock—and so, respectable opinion held, she could not be ‘pure’. Hardy challenges the idea of female purity and calls Tess ‘pure’ on the basis of her moral integration.

Independence and strength separate Hardy’s heroines from the previous idea of the Victorian heroine. The combination of sexuality and masculine qualities in Hardy’s passionate heroines exemplifies a new characterization of women.4

In Jude the Obscure, Sue offers another example. She lives with Jude and bears him children even though they are not married to each other, and so conventional prejudice would stamp her as ‘depraved’. She is, in fact, an extremely moral person, conscientious and even high-minded. In a novel such as Tess or Jude, the reader is invited to examine all the evidence relating to a very complex case. Repeatedly, reviewers or so-called police of Victorian prudishness; saw Hardy’s treatment of sexual desires as sensational, violent, pagan and bestial. What is more troubling is that, he not only offered unusually explicit description of female desires, but his sympathetic treatment of his heroines is against the zeitgeist.

This laodiceanism in Hardy’s heroine is a psychological struggle: to abide by Victorian norms or to live a life unshackled. The interpretation of Hardy’s texts by Havelock Ellis5 is of paramount importance in the light of sexology. It is a new genre of science which deals with psycho-sexual interpretation in late 19th and early 20th century. In 1893, Ellis placed Hardy’s fiction—because of its “conception of love as the one business of life”—in the feminine tradition of novel writing represented by Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, and George Eliot. In Ellis’s view, Hardy’s heroines are more ‘instinct led’, than concerned with moral questions:6

Morals, observe, do not come in... Mr. Hardy’s heroines are characterized by a yielding to circumstance that is limited by the play of instinct. They are never quite bad. It seems, indeed, that this quality in them, which shuts them out from any high level of goodness, is precisely that which saves them from every being very bad. They have an instinctive self-respect; an instinctive purity.... Even Eustacia Vye has no impure tent about her. One feels compelled to insist on the instinctiveness of these women.7

In this exploration of Victorian prudish attitude towards ethics, morality, sex and

5Havelock Ellis (1859-1939), English author, sexual psychologist and social reformer.
sexuality, it is worth considering what Dellamora\textsuperscript{8} and Kincaid\textsuperscript{9} have explored. Both critics point to the ways in which Hardy’s fiction simultaneously depicts and elicits sexual responses that are transgressive. In her book Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick makes only brief mention of the Henchard-Farfrae relationship as subliminally erotic. But Hardy’s fiction offers great potential for an analysis of a gender framework in which women are the mediating link between men. Homoerotic relationships are pervasive in Hardy\textsuperscript{10} and little has been done with this interesting topic. More ignored is still the subject of female same-sex desire in Hardy, for example, lovemaking scene in bed, in the Cytherea-Miss Aldclyffe relationship of Desperate Remedies. Hardy represents physical and emotional ties between women that seem in the eyes of the 20th century readers, startlingly explicit. For this reason alone, readers in the 21st century will persist in reading the works of Thomas Hardy for their conflicted and contradictory engagement with matters of gender in Victorian England.

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\textsuperscript{9}James Kincaid. “Girl-Watching, Child-beating and Other Exercises for Readers of Jude the Obscure”, in The Sense of Sex. Feminist Perspectives on Hardy.