

Feminist Aspects in the Select Novels of Thomas Hardy

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Abstract:

Feminism is concerned with the emancipation of women by liberating them from man's domination. It demands that women should be treated as autonomous subjects and not as passive objects. What peculiarly signalizes the situation of woman is that she finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of 'the other'. Society being codified by man decreases that woman is inferior to man. She can do away with this inferior status only by rejecting the male superiority. To contemporary women, sexual harassment can clearly be seen as a phenomenon arising out of a society which condones male dominance and female subordination. Sexual harassment has been practiced on women whenever they have assumed a position to change the authority of the male. In literature, women writers had to contend with the imposition of limitations to their education and their chances to publish and circulate their work. Women education was intended to provide them with the skills that would make them better wives and mothers.

Key Words: Feminism, Emancipation, Autonomous, Codified, Harassment, Condone

Narration: Feminists argue that woman should be left alone to live on her own strength and means to fight against the unjust system and obtain her own subsistence and thereby remove her dependant status. Women reared and trained exactly like men were to work under same conditions and on the same wages. Sexual act was not to be considered as a service to be paid her. Woman was obliged to provide herself with the other ways earning a living. Marriage was intended to be based on a free agreement which the contracting partners could break at will. Maternity was to be voluntary which meant contraception and abortion were to be authorized.

It is also the contention of the feminists that a change in women's economic condition alone is not enough to transform her. Though this has been and still remains the basic factor in her evolution, the new woman cannot emerge until the moral, social, cultural and other changes are brought about. Liberty for women is still an abstract empty position. She can exercise it only in revolt, the only door open to those who have opportunity to do anything constructive. They must break away from the limitations of their situation and work for their own liberation. This liberation must also be collective effort and requires, first of all, to build a secure economic condition.

Oppression of women happens to be the main themes of Hardy's major novels which is extensively discussed by feminist theorists as well, who try to find ways to eradicate it. If Hardy's feminism is to be understood in the right perspective, it must be seen in relation to the

contemporary feminist theories. Though there was no particular feminist theory as such, yet there are various perspectives. Each one attempts to analyze the topic of women's oppression, its causes and consequences and prescribes strategies for their liberation. Each one of these is only a particular answer to the woman's question. What is fascinating is how these provisional answers join together to explore the ways in which women have been oppressed and celebrate the ways in which many women have managed to take charge of their own destinies.

For liberal feminists, woman's subordination is rooted in a set of conventions and legal constraints that hinder woman's progress. The true potential of women goes unrealized as she is condemned as being incapable, physically as well as intellectually, by the society. Liberal feminists argue that if woman is given the same civil and educational rights as men, she is bound to achieve eminence in all fields.

In the Nineteenth century, J.S. Mill differed from Wollstonecraft in insisting that society must provide women not only with the same education, but also with the same civil liberties and economic opportunities that men enjoyed. But like Wollstonecraft Mill too denied that there were intellectual or moral differences between men and women. Mill argued that any intellectual disparity existing between men and women could be explained as brought about by man's privileged status. Hardy has dealt extensively in the context of conventionality in marriage, maltreatment of women by men, the unequal divorce laws and the inadequate facilities for women's education. Hence, Hardy's views can be considered identical to those of liberal feminists.

According to the Marxists feminists, women's oppression began with the introduction of "Private Poverty" that erased whatever the human community had hitherto enjoyed. They strongly hold the view that "Capitalism" is the root cause of women's oppression and if women are to be liberated, the capitalist system must be replaced by a social system in which the means of production belong to all. Under socialism, no one being dependent on other, women will be economically independent and equal to men. For liberal feminists, the ideas of individuals accounts for any change in society, whereas Marxist feminists reject the aforesaid view and stress that production alone is only the primary source of change over time.

In other words, a monogamous family is not the product of love but of economic power. He contends that male-dominance is simply the result of class-division between the propertied man and the unpropertied woman. He also concludes that of women are to be liberated from the oppression of their husbands; they must first become economically independent. However, Marxist feminists do not discuss issues such as sexuality, double standards of morality and prostitution. Even in their discussions on sex-related issues, there is tendency to compare sex to work. They consider women's oppression as a class-struggle and do not venture to tackle problem related to oppression imposed on women by men. It is unfortunate that even in socialist systems like the ones existing in China and Russia, oppression of women persists. For radical feminists, the oppression of women is a fundamental form of oppression. They argue that it is

the patriarchal system characterized by power and dominance that oppresses women. In sexual politics, Kate Millett establishes that patriarchy is a system where male-domination and female's submission is achieved through ideological means. According to radical feminists, patriarchy cannot be reformed and therefore can only be destroyed. Hence they advocate that patriarchy should be destroyed from legal, social, political and cultural institutions. Though the radical feminists writings are various, one of their important theme is ' the effect of female biology' on women's function in the private and public sectors.

In the dialectic of sex Shulamith Firestones says that the subordination of women is rooted in the biological inequality of the sexes. She considers relations of reproduction, rather than production, as the driving force in history she concludes that women's liberation requires as biological revolution and not an economic explanation. Her contention is that women must seize and control the means of reproduction in order to eliminate the sexual differences. Hence women need not be confined to homes, with the result that they will have enough time to labor in the public realm. Her point of view is that when there are no longer, distinct reproductive and productive roles for men and women, it will be feasible to overcome all notions, which divide the human community into oppressing males and oppressed females. Sexuality is discussed extensively by radical feminists and that is vital to any woman seeking to understand her personal and political position in society.

In of woman born, Adrienne Rich articulates the difference between the experience of mothering and the institution of motherhood. She argues that women should have the right to decide when to mother and when not, without complying with men's wishes. She believes that if woman take control of child-bearing and child-rearing more mothers would be able to experience biological motherhood on their own terms. She rejects Firestones plea that female biology has limitation and the only way to liberate women from it is through technology. To Rich, the answer is that women should rear their children with feminist ideals. However, racial feminists have proposed several ways to enable women to escape from the sexual domination of men. They urge women to transform the institution of heterosexuality in favor of celibacy and lesbianism as they insist that men rather than society have forced women into the oppressive gender roles.

For some radical feminists, eradication of gender is the best method to eliminate male control. In her sexual politics, Kate Millet finds that sex gender system is the real source of women's oppression. She suggests an androgynous future where the ideal human being combines in himself/herself masculine and feminine traits. Such integration of traits must proceed cautiously. In spite of their limitations, feminists owe much to radical feminism, as the insight that sexuality is the main cause of women oppression is vital to any woman seeking to perceive her personal and political position in society. Radical feminists have shown how women's bodies can be used by women themselves against women. They teach women how to celebrate their nature and how sexuality can become a source of power for each and every woman in the future.

In the reproduction of mothering, Nancy Chodorow suggests that shared parenting and the involvement of men as primary caretakers of children will have a profound effect on women's sense of gender identity and sexual preference. In her opinion, dual participation in the work-force will exchange their gender structure of the Oedipus complex. Authority will no longer be the exclusive property of men dependence will no longer be the only possession of women. However psychoanalytical explanations of women's oppression do not provide a comprehensive answer to female subordination as political and economic institutions have not been taken into account. Any change for women should begin within the individual woman herself and this will provide her with a positive attitude to think of herself as a new woman.

Social feminism is largely the result of Marxist feminist dissatisfaction with the gender-binding character of Marxist thought. They reject the tendency of Marxists to regard women's oppression. Therefore, many socialists became convinced that living in a class-society is not the only primary cause of women's oppression. Juliet Mitchell is an example of a dual-system theorist. She couples a non-materialist account of patriarchy with a materialist account of capitalism. She believes that some aspects of women's life in the family are economic while the others are ideological and social. These social and ideological aspects will remain the same even if there is any change in the mode of production. Mitchell believes that any change in the status of women should be accompanied by the defeat of capitalism as well as patriarchy.

She is convinced that the causes of women's oppression are buried very deep in the human psyche. As she sees it, its attitude towards women will never really change as long as male and female psychology are governed by the phallic symbol. In other words, she suggests that we should use Marxist strategies to topple capitalism and psychoanalytical strategies to overthrow patriarchy. For a unified system theorist, class analysis is not specific. According to Iris Young, division of labor analysis is more specific than class-analysis. She argues that class analysis focuses on the means of production in general terms, while a division of labor analysis pays attention to the individual people who do the work in the society. In other words, division of labor analysis can be better explaining why women get paid less and do the cheap work while men give out the orders and get paid more.

However Iris Young believes that division of labor has the conceptual power to change Marxist feminist theory which is powerful enough to accommodate the ideas of Marxist, radical and psychoanalytic feminists in a unitary framework. Simone De Beauvoir's, *The Second Sex* plays an important role in understanding existentialist feminism. It has helped many feminists to understand the full significance of a woman's 'otherness'. Though racial psychoanalytic and Marxist feminists have important things to say about the causes of women's oppression Beauvoir sees that none of them truly demonstrates why woman is always 'the other'. Beauvoir argues that the emancipated woman should seek professional autonomy and financial independence. She also encourages women to be intellectual and so study writers such as Emily Bronte, Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield who have been able to probe the sufferings of women.

She concludes that woman will always be restricted by the kind of existence that has been allotted to them. Therefore, women should create a special space for themselves if they want to be free.

Conclusion: Jean Elshtain criticizes Beauvoir's concept that woman's independence is won at the cost of rejecting her reproductive capacities. For her, immanence and transcendence essence and existence are ideas that do not arise directly out of woman's lived experience. Feminists generally emphasize unity and integration. They attempt to integrate all aspects of a woman's life and produce a unified feminist theory.

For some critics, the rejection of post-modern feminism is based on the dismissal of academics as separate from the real world. They criticize post-modern feminists for using language and ideas in such a specific way that no one else can understand them. However, these feminist perspectives are only attempts to explain women's subordination and oppression. Thus, it is a major challenge to contemporary feminism to reconcile with the pressure to differ from those who demand integration. It is vital to develop coordination and a comprehensive understanding among the various groups of feminists. Otherwise, it will be very difficult to lay claim to what is good and what is bad for women. We believe that such coordination can make feminists achieve their goals and help them to eradicate women's sufferings concretely.

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