Attitude of New Woman in Thomas Hardy's Jude the Obscure

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to study the novel Jude the Obscure which deals with 19th Century's cultural and social predicament of woman. Hardy tries to provide all kinds of support to the female characters and allow them to face the challenges of the social law. In the novel Jude the Obscure Hardy shows more insight into the female heart than he had ever shown before. Sue attracts the attention of us and marks a long time effect. In other words, Sue is the 'New Woman', the woman who did not recognize the necessity to follow marriage as a profession. According to Victorian social law the female characters classified and labeled by the male counterparts with the use of language, education, marriage, freedom, self-improvement, and intellect all are challenged by the female protagonist Sue. The author has presents her as inspiring for modern woman.

Thomas Hardy is one of the most influential writers of the 19th and 20th Centuries. He was a rebel against contemporary complacency and orthodoxy. He is well known of his depictions of man, women, society religion and nature as found in the Victorian era. In novels of struggle and heartache, Hardy wrote of women's strength, intelligence and capacity– all qualities he demonstrates as essential to female nature. The age of Hardy was an age of material affluence, political consciousness, domestic reforms, industrial and mechanical progress, scientific advancement, social unrest, educational expansion and religious uncertainty. The intellectual atmosphere of the age was surcharged with new ideas which sought to find an expression in art and literature. Hardy's novels revolve around dominant woman characters and support women's strength, patience and freedom. Penny Boumelha notes in her introduction The Woodlanders (1887), "Hardy was no pioneer in the debate on women's rights and marriage laws in the Press and Parliament in the 1880s, but he was certainly part of the dialogue" (Boumelha xii). Boumelha has further posited, "Hardy was soon depicted as a willing conscript in the so-called 'Anti-marriage League' of moral skeptics and social critics identified in the 1890s as crusading conservatives" (Boumelha xii).

Hardy held no firm stance on women's rights but wrote primarily on the prohibiting artifice found in the Victorian standards. His fictional characters depict a longing for a return to a natural existence in their relationship, with each of his novels upholding more defined women as heroines. From Cythera craze to Sue Bridehead, the heroines of Hardy demonstrate the evolution of women's reemergence as independent-minded individuals as well as of their destructive thoughts created by a society. Hardy offered his women a voice reflecting the anxiety and
ambiguity of their changing role in society.

Hardy lined in a time of flux and was exposed to many new ideas that he combined with his own life experiences and personal outlook to form a vision of how things should be even though they were not just yet. As in the novel Jude the Obscure Sue Bridehead sums up her reasons for marrying Phillotson in her confession to Jude, "When people of a later age look back upon the barbarous customs and superstitions of the times that we have unhappiness to live in, what will they say?" (JO 187). The tragic ending of the novel beg the questions of Hardy's comfort level with women figures as he presents in Sue, possibly bring her low as a consequences of their desire to break free from society's expectations.

Sue Bridehead is an intelligent, sensitive refined and rather unconventional young woman. Unlike other female characters of the novel, Sue struggles with her role as a woman. First, she attempts to conform to the accepted role of a housewife in her marriage to Richard Phillotson, but later realizes her charlataan ways and decides to live with her heart's love Jude. As H.C. Duffin defines her, "She is quiveringly sensitive, she is often perverse; she is alive with emotions and acts on lightning impulses." (Duffin 224).

After experiencing a bitter marital relationship with Phillotson, Sue decides to urge her husband to release her in order to return to her idealistic life. She quotes from J.S. Mill in order to express it to her husband: "she or he, who lets the world, or his own portion of it, has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation" (JO 301). Sue has an unconventional view of marriage. Sue's view about things in general are most unconventional until the deaths of her children bring about a transformation in her. Sue is unorthodox in a religious sense also, she does not believe in prayer, and Jude called her a "Voltairean" (JO 131). She also believes that railway station is presently the centre of the town life and that the cathedral has its day. She also believes that Christ minister is "new wine in old bottles" (JO 129). Sue's contradictory impulses creating a sense of mystery are dramatized with extra-ordinary fullness and concreteness.

Sue unconventionality is seen also in her going with Jude for a sight - seeing excursion when she spends a right with him in the countryside at a Shepherd's cottage. Sue's apparent lack of parental guidance is an evidence of her early carving for education and freedom. Stave believes that, "Sue's strong desire for independence is one of her most appealing characteristics" (Stave 140), especially when contrasted to Arabella's dependency on men. Stave has also asserted that "she is typically direct, honest and straight forward" (Stave 140), showing her lack of fear in offending others or breaking social norms or morals. Through the character
of Sue, Hardy conveys a free spirit against a oppressive society, the ethereal against the commonplace and the material. Hardy also depicts her as imbued with a strong element of Victorianism which shows itself in her strong aversion to sexual relationship with a man.

Through the novels, Hardy challenged the rigid code of the Victorian social standards in his writing. In an evolutionary discourse of women, Hardy's novels grow progressively more revealing, highlighting the hypocrisy and futility of the era's double standards and suppression of women, culminating in the shocking stories. Unlike other novels of Hardy *Jude the Obscure* treats life from different aspects. Among the most important theme discussed by this novel are: the marriage question and the new women, the will and resignation, aspirations and class prejudice, fate and the flaws of personality, and the conflict between the ideal and the social.

In the novel Hardy creates Sue Bridehead a character representing the strife of the 'New Woman' to reach freedom and self-improvement. In order to keep her moral and intellectual integrity, Sue tries throughout the novel to oppose the conventional marriage and the sexual submission to men. Sue questions to the legal and religious doctrines of the Victorians society and tries to envision different moral codes that are not based on religion or law but on the principle of individual happiness and equality of women. Hardy gives his New Woman a character of education and intellect. Sue's ambition towards intellectualism and self-improvement leads her to reject conventional marriage but no matter how she tries to impose her ideals, the Victorian society has already established some moral codes to women.

Through Sue's education and self study Hardy demonstrates that a woman could articulate and defend her position with a rational argument. Sue is a highly intelligent and well educated woman. Jude calls her "a creature of civilization" (JO 126). She has read most of the Greek and Latin Classics through translations and many other books too. Sue may be a representative woman of the Victorian society, yet she is not completely inexperienced with men. Jude Famley and Richard Phillotson are not the first men she is seriously involved with. As she tells Jude that she was living with an unnamed undergraduate when she was eighteen, who taught her a great deal in the academic sense. When she gives Jude a list of the books she has read, he becomes rather impressed and admits that she is much more widely - read than he is. Her wide reading enables her to quote such writer J.S. Mill and Humboldt when she is discussing with Phillotson her proposal to leave him. In her conversation with Jude also, she often talks about authors like Shelley. Hence we find that the unnamed undergraduate gave Sue educational advantage which was not usually
available to a young Victorian woman. He enables Sue to be a part of a wider world from which she would be cut without his support.

Sue is more self-awareness than Tess and more socially conscious than Bathsheba. Sue understands the law of future and revels in denying it. She questions laws which "make you miserable when you know you are committing no sin" (JO 285) denounce those who let "the world . . . choose plan of life for [them as having] the ape-like one of imitation" (JO 286) and demands a way of life in which she can live side by side with a man "unconscious of gender" (JO 203). Sue does not see her sexual self-restraint as an attempt to fit in the patriarchal model of a chaste Victorian woman. For her to consummate a relationship with a man is to lose her power. Not until Sue's standing relationship with Jude is threatened by the appearance of Arabella does Sue feel threatened enough to find that offering herself sexually provides a more powerful tool than to further withhold her sexual favours from her cousin.

Though Sue chooses to use her sexuality to secure her tie with Jude, she is repulsed by the business-like attitude towards sex and marriage. But Arabella uses sexuality to get what she wants from Jude, from her second husband and finally from Vilbert. Sue continues to reject the convention of marriage and does not play the games at which Arabella is so skilled. Sue is not comfortable with the role of wife or mistress and cannot reconcile this with her resolve to mix with man "almost as one of their own sex" (JO 202) in being Jude's mistress. Sue is no longer the comrade she wished to be and instead takes on the passive "feminine" role of the conquered woman. We find an instance of this in the novel:

I ought to have known that you would conquer in the long run, living like this! She ran across and fleeing her arms round his neck. I am not a cold-natured, sexless creature, am I, for keeping you at such a distance? I am sure you do not think so! Wait and see! I do belong to you, don't I? I give in! (JO 332)

When Sue consummates her relationship with Jude and allows herself to be falsely taken for his wife, she give up the only power she understands. She starts existing as a negation of the society "outside all laws except gravitation and germination" (JO 39) Fernando's comment on Sue Bridehead is that "the struggle of the Victorian heroine in the late nineteenth-century fiction for liberation from her traditional role and personality comes to a climax" (Fernando 142). It seems totally true in favour of Sue. By patriarchal standard, Sue is sexless but she denies being "cold-natured" and declares herself to be "self-contained". Fernando points out this when he remarks that Sue personifies "the extreme refinement of sexual sensibility, the extreme moral fastidiousness . . ." (Fernando 143).
In the novel Hardy used 'society, women and nature as an argument in Women's Right Movement. Feminist critics in the 1970s cited the works of Hardy in support of women's liberation. Mary Jacobus attributed Hardy's... compassionate identification with his heroine with an authorial allegiance to a living, breathing sentient women (which) evades external standards of judgment. (Mary 321)

Jacobus added that-

Hardy is imaginatively generous towards both sides of struggles, but as always his most intense feeling is for the loser... Sue's tormented consciousness haunts us more than Jude's bitter oblivion. (Mary 314).

We becomes aware of Hardy's response to women's struggles; he made them human and depicted their needs and passions as natural. In 1929, Rosalind Miles aggress about Hardy's concern for women. She wrote thus:

Heartsick at the world's cruelty or worse indifference, Hardy solaced himself by creating feminine softness and constancy. He found a recurrent consolation in rendering with loving exactness, through the mediation of these imaginary women, the sensation of the castaway. (Miles 27)

Hardy admired women and presented them to the world as pillars of strength and promise for a better future. Sue is an ideal example of the New Woman because she provides the opportunity to us to study the effects of different kinds of upbringing and education, as well as the influence of instinct and convention. Sue is the woman who does not recognise the necessity to follow marriage as a profession. She is a radical skeptic and it is her habit to ponder and question the arrangements and tyrannies of society. More or less she is self-educated and she has encountered new progressive and advanced ideas about religion, art and socio-culture aspects.

Hardy shows a great power of differentiation in portraying his women characters. Indeed, Hardy is regarded as a specialist in delineation of women. Deep as is his understanding of human nature as a whole, it is in the female personality that he is most wonderfully learned. An outstanding example of his gift of portraying woman is Sue Bridehead who has been called Hardy's "Supreme female creation". It is possible, though not necessary, to regard Sue as the first delineation in fiction of the New Woman, the woman of the feminist movement.

From beginning to end, she remains a loving personality. She casts a spell upon us which is never broken. She enthralls not only Phillotson Jude, and Arabella but us also. Sue is, indeed, unique in the gallery of the women characters created by Hardy. We must at any rate recognize the creative insight that enabled Hardy to handle two opposed Tess and Sue - with equal sympathy, equal understanding and equal conviction. Sue is an intellectual
woman, as distinguished from the non-intellectual and sensuous Tess.

In fact, Sue is a most subtle delineation of uncommon type of woman in the modern world. We find her as Hardy's version of the New Woman. She is contrasted to other Hardy's heroines because she is an intellectual while the others are much closer to passion. If can be said that she survives because of her ambiguity and her sexual ambivalence of which she is aware all the time. Sue is unconventional and unorthodox in all her actions. Being contrary to all the feminine fundamentals, she gets our sympathy against all odds. She is frank, honest and has an unforgettable personality.

Works Cited