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### 'Female Subjectivity' within and beyond Victorian 'Purity': Rereading Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

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#### Abstract

Female subjectivity is an awareness to create an identity of her own while contesting with patriarchal norms of the society. In Victorian era, Thomas Hardy in his novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) manifested the same through the portrayal of his protagonist, 'Tess'. In a society which is judgmental of women's character and values it around her virginity and sexual choices, 'purity' or 'fallen' become a tool to emboss patriarchal hypocrisy. However, Hardy builds his narrative in such a way that it reaches beyond this duality of pure-impure and projects Tess not only as pure but also relevant to the contemporary narrative wherein one intends to discuss her survivor in every sense of the term. Within such Victorian debate between women's 'purity' and 'fallenness', Hardy characterizes Tess not only as a mere object before patriarchal authority, rather find ways to construction her subjectivity which this article intends to explore through the theoretical framework of Chris Weedon's vision of female subjectivity as reflected in her book *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (1987) which bears immense relevance even in 21<sup>st</sup> century regarding women's predicament.

Key Words: 'Subjectivity', 'Purity', 'Virginity', 'Patriarchy', 'Victorian'

Thomas Hardy is one of the most renowned authors from Victorian age who often highlights the bleak and dark aspects of human existence with special adherence to women. He represents the society which has not just pessimistic undertone but an unfateful and sad layering to it of which novels like *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), *The Mayor of Caster Bridge* (1886), *Jude the Obscure* (1895) and most prominently in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) can be best suited examples. On a surface scale it may appear that his vision is only to reflect on Victorian moral codes and conducts in a woman's life but close analysis of the novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* unfolds the layered significance of his imaginative world through which he brings forth a woman's life who is very much an outsider in her own society on so-called moral basis of her sexuality or so for her 'impurity'. Within such Victorian debate between women's 'purity' and 'fallenness', Hardy not only projects Tess's character as a mere object or victim before patriarchal authority, rather find ample ways for the construction of female subjectivity through his protagonist's life which this article intends to explore within the framework of Chris Weedon's vision of female subjectivity as discussed in her book *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (1987). This theoretical model is relevant beyond the Spatio-temporal Victorian society of Wessex as till date women are 'other' in dominant social discourse which often aligns their 'virginity' with 'purity' and thereby, subversion of such outlook through 'subjectivity' construction is a worthy debate. Linda

Shires' comment is a remarkable one as for her "*Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is not only the richest novel that Hardy ever wrote, it is also the culmination of a long series of Victorian texts which identify, enact, and condemn the alienated condition" (p. 159) of modern women in turn.

Considering 'sexuality', Jeffery Weeks in his book *Sexuality* defines it as a social construction that "does demand distinctions, and creates boundaries" between "masculinity and femininity" and also adds that "male sexuality as culturally defined provides the norm and, not surprisingly, female sexuality continues to be the problem. Males, in *becoming* men, take up positions in power relations in which they acquire the ability to define women" (p. 54-55). This implicates the authoritative power of masculinity before which women become the 'other' or in Simon de Beauvoir's term 'the second sex'. As far as Victorian society is concerned, it often visualized women as domestic, submissive, motherly and idealizes them as 'Angel in the House' which Coventry Patmore captures in his poetry of the same name. Basically, women space was within the private space of home till death and thereby, working women were often the soft targets of Victorian moral codes whereas, males had all rights to access public spaces like "literary and philosophical societies, the various scientific societies, statistical societies, gentlemen's clubs and societies" (Wolff, 33). Such a conventional society where there was rigid and categorical demarcation between male and female accesses, women were often restricted from public spaces on the basis of moral codes that emphasized upon 'purity' of women within the parameters of socially accepted norms. The most stringent attribute of women's 'purity' in Victorian society was her virginity and to specify such societal outlook Jessica Valenti's poses pertinent questions in *The Purity Myth*, "for women especially, virginity has become the easy answer—the morality quick fix. You can be vapid, stupid, and unethical, but so long as you've never had sex, you're a "good" (i.e., "moral") girl and therefore worthy of praise" (p. 24). If a woman wasn't a virgin or couldn't prove herself one, particularly within the institution of family or more specifically in marriage, she was considered as a 'fallen woman'. Such obsession with women's purity making it almost synonymous to the honour of the family became one of the contentious point of concern is the times then and the times now.

In such society, superficially coded with moral value system that judges individuals, especially women, Thomas Hardy goes to the extent of using a subtitle like 'A Pure Woman' in his novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* for a woman who was raped and as a consequence of that becomes a mother before marriage. Here, Hardy's point of emphasis is to claim the innate purity of Tess for her affinity with Nature as well as for her innocent and responsible 'self' and that is the reason he gets into an extensive explanation to the criticism that can emerge out of subtitle in the 'Preface' section of his novel as for him such criticism reveals, an inability to associate the idea of the sub-title adjective with any but the artificial and derivative meaning which has resulted to it from the ordinances of civilization. They ignore the meaning of the word in Nature, together with all aesthetic claims upon it, not to mention the spiritual interpretation afforded by the finest side of their own Christianity. (p. 4-5)

Justification of such a comment from the author, itself finds extensive significance through the projection of female subjectivity in the novel. As far as subjectivity is concerned it is a conscious choice of 'self' within "the tension between choice and illusion, between imposed definitions and individual interrogations of them, between old formulae and new responsibilities" (p. 2) as explained by Donald E. Hall in the book *Subjectivity*. The same is also highlighted by Jeffery Weeks as for him within the social influences "we construct our subjectivities, our sense of who we are, how we came to where we are, where we want to go" (p. 53). What both these critics indicate is the fact that societal influences cannot be ignored in the construction of subjectivity, rather they can be an important issue to identify the 'self' within in liaison with the society one is part of, indeed struggle but finally, survive.

From the very onset of the novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Hardy's approach towards Tess as a subject becomes evident contrary to the parallel representation of the other country girls in the May Day celebration only as part of 'white dressed exhibition' under the anonymous gaze. Where these village girls have undergone 'crisis in representation' only as mere objects of exhibition, Tess is the first one in the text who has been projected as an individual. With the entry of Tess's father, her name gets echoed in

the entire festival and thereby, her presence is recognized and becomes prominent other than the crowd as soon as she nods her head:

“The Lord-a-Lord! Why, Tess Durbeyfield, if there isn’t thy father riding hwoome in a carriage!” A young member of the band turned her head at the exclamation. She was a fine and handsome girl- not handsomer than some others, possibly- but her mobile peony mouth and large innocent eyes added eloquence to colour and shape. She wore a red ribbon in her hair, and was the only one of the white company who could boast of such a pronounced adornment (Hardy, 20)

This section can built upon substantial arguments that hint at Tess’s subjectivity construction throughout the text as she has been the focus amidst the white crowd and described as a distinct ‘self’.

Chris Weeden in her book *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* outlines female subjectivity as “the product of the society and culture in which we live... (that) changes with shifts in the wide range of discursive fields which constitutes them” (p. 33). Such change which she refers is only possible through self-initiatives and choices. Before Victorian society’s prime demand of superficial ‘purity’ solely based on ‘body’ or virginity of women, Tess exemplifies alternative shifts for ‘purity’ concept in psychological as well as ethical terms through her innocence and sheer sense of responsibility which in turn exhilarates her subjectivity construction. There are ample references regarding this in Hardy’s text like Tess’s intense sense of responsibility becomes evident in her journey with horse Prince and her ethical purity becomes explicit as she considers herself responsible Prince’s death: “Tis all my doing– all mine!... No excuse for me– none” (p. 39). It is her ethics which prompts her for self-condemnation although it was not her fault at all as she slept solely for her tiredness, not for her lack of sincerity. Regarding this Schweik in his article, “Moral Perspective in Tess of the D’Urbervilles” asserts that “moral responsibility which troubles her after the accident” proves her purity not fallenness as Tess “is hardly responsible for the accident which kills the Durbeyfield horse” (p. 17-18). Rather it can be considered as the fault of Mr. Durbeyfield whose over-drunkenness put Tess in such situation. However, in that tough circumstance too Tess’s concern was sole for her family’s livelihood for which she has uttered, “What will mother and father live on now? Aby, Aby!” (p. 39). This undoubtedly reflects her purity of soul not fallenness.

Surprisingly enough such ethical purity had hardly any scope within Victorian morality, rather sexual virginity was the sole criterion for women’s purity. It was all ok for men to have sexual urge which is ‘natural’ for society but for women “Victorian society exacerbates age-old harsh and hypocritical definitions of virtue and exhortations for maidens to conform” (Alexander, 87). For this when Tess has been sexually assaulted by Alec, society attempts to justify male action as a result of female seduction and there are lots of debate over this rape of Tess, only to prove her as ‘fallen’ women in dominant discourse. However, in reality rape is what Rosemarie Morgan describes as,

an act of theft, a dishonest appropriation of another’s property with the intent to deprive her of it permanently. The term suffices to denote the moral nature of the act, which passes beyond sexual assault to take account of violation of rightful ownership. It is a fitting emphasis in a novel that stresses a sexual ethic that denies woman the right to control not only her own mode of existence but also her own body. (p. 94)

Such immoral act Alec has conducted and regarding this references are there in the novel *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, which accounts for Tess’s innocent ‘self’ as she was sleeping when the incident took place: “He (Alec) knelt, and bent lower, till her breath warmed his face, and in a moment his cheek was in contact with hers. She was sleeping soundly, and upon her eyelashes there lingered tears” (Hardy, 82).

Critic Davis Jr. in his article, “The Rape of Tess: Hardy, English Law, and the Case for Sexual Assault” reflects upon Tess’s rape from a legal perspective and since she was unconscious, verbal or non-verbal communication is not possible and therefore, Tess’s consent or seduction is just irrelevant. In fact, Hardy’s details about this incident also provide scope for Alec’s fault and Tess’s innocence:

Why it was that upon this beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and practically blank as snow as yet, there should have been traced such a coarse pattern as it was doomed to receive; why so often the coarse appropriates the finer thus, the wrong man the woman, the wrong woman the man, many thousand years of analytical philosophy have failed to explain to our sense of order. (p. 82)

Here, Tess has been compared with ‘gossamer’ and ‘blank snow’ to emphasize her innocence or for so her purity and this innocence becomes a prominent attribute in her subjectivity construction later as well. It is not just Tess has endured the physical pain, beyond that she gave birth to a child out of this unwanted pregnancy, and again the child also died soon. Here Tess endorses her subjectivity with strong will rather being a passive one, as she overcomes the pain of child loss and moves forward to sustain her existence by leaving her village for Talbothays Dairy.

Chris Weedon in the book *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* asserts one of the ways of constructing female subjectivity by “reflect(ing) upon the discursive relations which constitute her (woman) and the society in which she lives, and able to choose from the options available” (p. 125). As far her life is concerned, post ‘fallen woman’ episode as a result of bearing a child without marriage, the supposedly ‘best option available’ to her was anchoring her innocence with intense closeness of Nature, which she did avail both, in Marlott and by shifting in Talbothays Dairy. By joining harvesting and farming, she becomes “part and parcel of outdoor nature, and is not merely an object set down therein as at ordinary times” (Hardy, 100). With farming she not only manages her economic self-sustainability but also acquires her identity as a ‘field-woman’ within which she can recognize her ‘self’, her confidence and more importantly her ‘innate sensation’ quite contrary to the traditional feelings regarding her misery. Like when she binds corn or unearths the roots, she becomes almost a part and parcel of Nature beyond the earthly contamination of being an erotic object under male gaze. Such association with nature provides her a valid platform to assert her subjectivity which she reasonably selects from the limited options available around her.

Tess’s association with Nature through harvesting also make ways for her towards a margin-less existence and this is well implied in Hardy’s description of her as a ‘field woman’, “a field-man is a personality afield; a field-woman is a portion of the field; she has somehow lost her own margin, imbibed the essence of her surrounding, and assimilated herself with it” (p. 100). It becomes only possible as her ‘self’ merges with Nature and Nature is all indeed boundless. While Victorian society’s crude codes marginalize Tess’s existence as a ‘fallen woman’ or for so make her an outsider of mainstream society, her decision of harvesting in the lap of nature extends her existence beyond all stringent societal norms of women’s sexuality. In the bosom of Nature, Tess becomes even more pure which may be one aspect of Hardy’s subtitle. Here, Hardy’s picturization of Tess in field is closely aligned with utopic vision of perhaps all women in some interminable scale as such existence erases all the socially formatted margins of women’s lives and provides scope for an authentic existence. Regarding this Kathleen Blake’s comment is worthy to mention as for her “a woman’s release from personality to become a portion of the field, an ‘essence of woman,’ or ‘soul at large’ is the most significant mode of marginlessness treated” (p. 695) which Hardy deftly manifested in his novel *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*.

Such intense innocence of Tess within and beyond natural landscape also drew attention of Angel Clare who immediately fell in love with her or for so with his dream image of Tess when she came in Talbothays Dairy and later also married her. Here Angel also endorses the Victorian obsession of women’s virginity and rustic purity, which becomes obvious from his own words, “what a fresh and virginal daughter of Nature that milkmaid is” (Hardy, 136) and thereafter, Angel goes for mythicizing Tess as per his own imagination rather considering her as a ‘being’ of flesh and blood: “she was no longer the milkmaid, but a visionary essence of woman- a whole sex condensed into one typical form. He called her Artemis, Demeter, and other fanciful names” (Hardy, 146). While patriarchal authority possesses fascination to idealize women as goddesses or angels, contrarily enough Hardy portrays Tess not simply as a passive ‘angel in the house’ kind of figure, rather as a woman who is very much conscious about her subjectivity and that is why she can boldly assert, “call me Tess” (Hardy, 146) when

her husband fantasizes her as mythic being. It also indicates the realistic nature of Tess who prefers to remain down to earth, real and never appeases herself with any superfluous existence for momentary happiness.

Here the dual façade of patriarchal conceptualization of women comes forth as soon as Tess has confessed to Clare her past mishap due to Alec's cunningness in which she hardly had any control over either the victimizer or the situation. The moment she declares her loss of virginity, she doesn't remain pure, innocent figure in his perception. Even he considers this rape as her fault like others in society and in Hardy's narration "nothing so pure, so sweet, so virginal as Tess had seemed possible all the long while that he had adored her, up to an hour ago" (p. 254). In brief, Clare's love for her was solely due to his perception of purity and obsession towards virginity of a woman which soon vanishes the moment he comes across reality, to the extent that he even starts considering her as another person altogether, not the same one he loved. He said that "you (Tess) were one person: now you are another" and also added that "the woman I have been loving is not you" (Hardy, 248). Significantly enough Tess is not a passive one to listen all these silently, rather she reasonably voices before such duplicitous tone of patriarchy as for her if one loves another it is only the 'self' to be considered irrespective of grace and circumstances. For this she questions:

I thought, Angel, that you loved me- me, my very self! If it is I you do love, O how can it be that you look and speak so? It frightens me! Having begun to love you, I love you forever- in all changes, in all disgraces, because you are yourself. I ask no more. Then how can you, O my own husband, stop loving me? (Hardy, 248)

Such observation of Tess exemplifies the core ethical purity of her as she has found love to cherish for another's 'self' solely without any interference of external codes and conducts. These stances of Tess were just beyond Clare's expectation because he did consider his wife as a *tabula rasa* to be molded with his idealizations only. For this when he had no valid answer for her logical questions, he just gave mere excuse of society for his changed behavior: "Don't, Tess; don't argue. Different societies different manners. You almost make me say you are an unapprehending peasant woman, who have never been initiated into the proportions of social things" (Hardy, 252). Such disjointedness between individual and society is a recurrent issue but major concern here is Tess's reason and her ethics which solidify her purity unquestionably and way for her subjectivity construction within and beyond Victorian societal constraints.

In the process of subjectivity construction as per Weedon, woman also "exists as a thinking, feeling subject and social agent, capable of resistance and innovations produced out of the clash between contradictory subject positions and practices" (p. 125). The same was also the position of Tess as society demanded her physical virginity, passive existence as a woman whereas, her entire life revolves around ethical purity, reason and her subjective beliefs. Within such contradictory position of her individuality and society, she also exhibits resistance through her action which apparently may appear unethical but layered issues can be unveiled by minute analysis. Critics often question her ethical purity for accepting Alec's proposal after Angel's desertion but that was nothing more than a situational demand as she had to sustain her existence. Justification for this can be visualized in Paris's assertion in the article "A Confusion of Many Standards: Conflicting Value Systems in Tess of the D'Urbervilles" that "Tess is pure because she never meant to do wrong, and, Hardy argues, we should judge a person by his intentions rather than by his acts" (p. 60). Even when Tess goes to the extent of murdering Alec, she was mentally very much unstable for all her conflicting agonies and murdering tendency was a hereditary trait of her lineage as per Hardy's narration. Whatever, may be the reason behind such conduct, at least she endorses resistance towards patriarchal domination for which she is ethically very much clear to herself and that is why, when the police arrived for her arrest she could boldly utter that "I am almost glad- yes, glad! This happiness could not have lasted- it was too much- I have had enough" and also added that "I am ready". Likewise, within the contradictory position of her 'self' and society, she manages to endow resistance and constructs her subjectivity.

After such detailed analysis of Tess's life in the novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, both from her subjective and social scale, there remains no grain to consider her a victim or for so a 'fallen woman'. From the very beginning she is hardworking and never relies upon the handouts of others and that's why after her unwanted pregnancy and subsequent child death, she sustains for her own subjectivity by earning her own livelihood without creating burden to her family. It is always the interplaying of chance and coincidences that causes tragic consequences in Tess's life but with self-willingness she even rebuttals her destiny all over again within the 'limited options available' which marks her strengthened sense of subjectivity. John Bayley also credits Hardy for his 'involuntary insights into his heroine's subjectivity' (p. 188). Moreover, in all her actions Tess never deviates from her sense of responsibility and core ethics and thereby, sustains her 'purity' throughout generating a counter discourse towards 'Victorian purity' beyond the margins of female sexuality or virginity for that matter. She remains as pure towards the end as she was in the beginning of the novel and therefore, she is 'a pure woman' in Hardy's conviction also which the Victorian critics failed to understand. Most importantly such concept of Tess's 'purity' achieved through her subjectivity construction, universalizes her predicament for women across spatio-temporality and for this Hardy's novel is as relevant and appealing in twenty-first century as it was in Victorian age.

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