Our Heritage

ISSN: 0474-9030
Vol-68-Issue-1-January-2020

From Myopia To Vision: A Study of Hardy's "Tess of The D'urbervilles"

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To Hardy life is a ceaseless moral and social struggle in which each new experience bestows upon man new knowledge and awakening. Growth of individual self in terms of sentience and broad awareness constitutes the basic theme of almost all of Hardy's novels. That is why Baker evaluates Hardy's novels as "histories of men and women in the act of living and achieving themselves or becoming." In his works the egocentric individual lives in an illusionary world and therefore, thinks wrongly and acts fallibly. But later on when the gates of self knowledge open because of his traumatic experiences and he starts interrogating his own conduct and this "questioning" proves to be "in the exploration of reality, the first step towards soul's betterment"

In the same way, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) can best be described as an allegory of the evolution of man's consciousness from myopia to vision. This process is depicted through the character of Tess in the form of the subtle process of gradual change from ignorance to knowledge. Her life enfolds the gradual refinement of her sensibilities and advancement of cognition and perception in her.

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Penelope Vigar befittingly comments in this regard: "Tess's metaphorical journey from rustic innocence to experience do continue a kind of pilgrims progress." At the start of her life's hazardous journey, Tess is an innocent adolescent girl, endowed with essential qualities of goodness of heart and nobility of character, but she is vitally deficient in practical knowledge. She is quite simple, gullible and ignorant. It is her naiveté and simplicity that become her tragic flaw. The root of tragedy of Tess is oriented in the circumstantial fact that she is badly parented. Her mother, Mrs. Joan, who encourages her husband to make castles of his knightly ancestry in the air is as myopic as a child. Desmond Hawkins aptly comments on the illusory nature of Tess's parents: "What is for Sir John pure fantasy is turned to practical account by the worldly wisdom of Joan."

Both of her parents are irresponsible, immature and ignorant. Tess, very conscientious and responsible by nature thinks that she can mend every matter in the household. She is "merely a vassal of emotions untinctured by experience" at this stage, though she takes the role of family head. That is why when her father is unable to carry the consignment of taking bee-hives to Casterbridge, she offers to go tough but she does not know the practical difficulties involved in it. Quite young and ignorant, she falls asleep on the way and allows the wagon to go into the coming mail-cart from opposite direction. She is startled out of her reverie by

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the sudden jerk only to find that she is not yet grown up enough to shoulder such a responsibility. The only means of family income, the horse named Prince, is killed due to her negligence. Extremely sensitive and conscientious, she is filled with a heavy sense of remorse and a killing sense of self-accusation for this negligence. Endowed with subduing guilt-complex, she is compelled to bow down before her mother's illogical plan. In fact, Tess also inherits her family traits of illusiveness and day-dreaming. She is "tractable" (Tess, p.36) and inexperienced, quite unaware of the fact that she is young and beautiful and a trap can be laid anywhere in the world to ensnare her simplicity. She goes reluctantly to claim kins at Trantbridge. Being impractical and novice, she makes no efforts to change the course of action, though she senses some unknown danger on his path.

Tess is like an inexperienced obedient girl in the hands of ignorant and elusive parents. She, like every other young person, stands in need of parental guidance at this stage but she lacks it utterly. In point of fact, Tess has been brought up in the environment of what H.C. Duffin calls "slip-shod" morality and hence no such education can be expected from her "slack-twisted parents". Though she is free from the coarse fiber of her mother, she is equally given to dreams and fantasies. Studied up to sixth standard under a London teacher, she is advanced in thought and "is already removed from her mother's fast perishing world by a gap of two hundred years" (Tess, p.50). However, her mother injects the idea of

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marriage with Alec as a very likely possibility. She is offended by her mother's childishness, yet she is not repelled by this idea. That is why when Alec offers her straw berries, she eats them in a "half-pleased, half reluctant state" (Tess, p.52). She is attracted quite instinctively toward Alec not because of his charm and flattery but because of what Ian Gregor says, "a sense of power" he exercises on her femininity. Quite unaware of the harm this new sense of freedom can do her; she relishes it, but only half-heartedly.

On close observation, one can easily know that Tess inherits "a slight incautiousness of character" (Tess, p.110) which, along with her inborn tractability and submissiveness of disposition, leads her to disaster. Returning home from the fair where Car Darch, Alec's latest Wench, attacks Tess, thinking her to be her supplanted. Horrified and confused, Tess is rescued by Alec, who carries her off into the woods. Tess flees with Alec on an "impulse" (Tess, p.82) quite unaware of the harm this saviour can do to her. As things stand, she is inexperienced and only "a picture of honest beauty, flanked by innocence and backed by simple-souled vanity" (Tess, p.225). Though physically grown up, mentally she is just a toddler, and any false sympathizer of Alec type can easily cheat and betray her. This view finds a fitting illustration in the incident of her seduction. She is so simple and naive that the ironic comment and timely warning of the folk women that she is going to fall "out of the frying pan into the fire" (Tess, p.100) fails to sound her

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against the impending danger. Again, she falls asleep on the leaves wrapped in Alec's great coat and wakes only to find herself "maiden no more" (Tess, p.92). After a month or so, Tess is made to realize that she has become a part of the "whorage" (Tess, p.83) of Darch sisters. She determines to leave the place on realizing the gravity of the matter and her own responsibility in it.

Thus, myopic and innocent Tess is "caught during her days of immaturity like a bird in a spring" (Tess, p.225) and becomes a helpless victim in "the trap" Alec set for her in her "simple youth" (Tess, p.431). Tess's spontaneous outburst before her mother is a sufficient proof of her ignorance and lack of education:

> O mother, I was a child when I left this house four months ago. Why did not you tell me there was danger in men-folk? Why did not you warn me? ladies know what to fend hands against because they read novels that tell them of these tricks; but I never had chance o' learning in that way, and you did not help me" (Tess, p.100).

This horrifying and shocking experience stirs Tess's consciousness. And with this stirring, the process of learning and growing is initiated. She emerges out of the fire of suffering wiser, saner and mature. She remains no more innocent and untinctured by experience. Though this seduction is a fall from innocence, it proves, in many ways, a fortunate fall in the sense that it awakens consciousness in Tess. From here onwards, her eyes become keener, tongue sharper, and her mind, quicker. In fact, seduction bestows upon her the bitter realisation that "the serpent

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hisses where the sweet birds sing" (Tess, p.118) and with this awakening, she changes "from a simple-girl to a complex woman" (Tess, p.119). However, Tess's journey from Marlott to Trantridge can best be described as a journey from Innocence to Experience, as Hardy tells us in his authorial comment:

> An ineradicable social chasm was to divide our heroine's personality thereafter from that previous self of hers who stepped from her mother's door to try her fortune at Trantridge Poultry farm.(Tess, p.91).

For Tess's people, such an occasion gives rise to dreaminess and scandal as is with her mother who sees this fall as an opportunity for wedlock, but for Tess, this is a sound thrashing to improve and educate her, and thus gives rise to reflectiveness which divides her not only from the world outside but also from her family. With the rise of consciousness in Tess, we see that "the gap which has always existed between the world of Marlott and her own" widens all the more. She can, now, well perceive the folly of her parent's vain-glorious hope of regaining their lost aristocracy. With the awakening of consciousness in Tess, she becomes capable of taking her own decisions and is no more tractable or submissive, yet her education is not complete. She gets her second lesson in the practical ways of the world when she gives birth to a baby. Her father does not allow her to get the child beptised through the proper ceremony for fear of public condemnation. However, "immature" (Tess, p.113) Tess assumes the role of a

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parson and baptizes the child before her brothers and sisters as congregation. But when the child dies, she is shocked to learn that her baptism has no religious sanction and hence not acceptable. The parson refuses to give a Christian burial to the unbaptised child. This incident destroys Tess's placidity beyond reparation; her religious faith is broken as she becomes aware of the hypocrisy and ceremoniousness of religion. Out of her disillusionment and disenchantment from religion tells the Vicar frankly: "Then I don't like you. … and I'll never come to your church no more (Tess, p.117)".

Thus, Tess moves a step further on the path of evolution of consciousness. Through such bitter experiments "symbols of reflectiveness passed into her face", and her voice acquires "a note of tragedy" (Tess, p.119). Jean Brooks pertinently comments on the significance of this experience: "The worn eaten saint … prepares both for Tess's growth towards a more advance kind of religion and for the deadness of its outer forms."

Now, Tess becomes, what Hardy calls, "a fine woman whom the turbulent experiences of the last two years (have) failed to demoralize" (Tess, p.119). These harrowing experiences prove an "education" (Tess, p.119) for Tess. These lacerating experiences of motherhood transform Tess swiftly and miraculously into, as H.C.Duffin comments, "a grater Tess".

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The next phase of Tess's mental awakening starts with her decision to leave Marlott under the illusion of getting rid of the stigma of unwed-mother. She presumes that she can get erase the blot by changing the environment. She does not comprehend the law of nature that we are what we have been and will be what we are. So, under myopia and ignorance, she thinks "The recuperative power which pervaded organic nature was surely not denied to maidenhood alone (Tess, p.119)."

Tess is still ignorant of the false notions of morality according to which chastity "once lost (is) always lost" (Tess, p.119). She has to pay the price for her ignorance when she marries Angel Clare under the illusion that past is past and of no significance in her new life. At times, she feels as if her past "were waiting like wolves just outside the circumscribing light", but, as Hardy adds further, in her "a spiritual forgetfulness co-exist(s) with an intellectual remembrance" (Tess, p.223). Her excessive love for Angel "irradiate(s) her into forgetfulness of her past sorrows" (Tess, p.223). Motivated and upsurge by "an invincible instinct towards self-delight" (Tess, p.120) she tends to shut her eyes on her past, but her search for a new life proves to be a wild goose chase and she is made to know the cyclic pattern of life. Her second effort for happiness repeats merely the previous pattern of illusion to reality. This time disillusionment comes more brutally and unscrupulously as the men of flesh is replaced by the man of intellect. Tess takes

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Angel to be a liberal, broad-minded and emancipated man, free from the narrow fetters of traditional conventions and dogmas. Tess is shocked to know that Angel is very much in the hands of rigid Puritanism and is as much fastidious about morality and chastity as any ordinary man in society. Her hope of being forgiven by Angel results in a fiasco. Quite contrary to her expectations, Angel reacts with a priggish shock, a virtuous horror and fanaticism. Tess is awakened to the fact that Angel is a comman Victorian who regards sexual offence as venial in a man and grave and unpardonable in a woman. She recognizes with wide-eyed perception that the world is not yet evolved enough to comprehend her predicaments and evaluate her objectively; the society is not yet prepared to accept her as a combination of sensuality and spirituality. After this, the more severe schooling she gets, the stronger and the more unflinching her undaunted spirit becomes. She maintains her equanimity even under most vulnerable circumstances. To Angel's allegations, she replies with a rare moral courage: "It is in your mind what you are angry at, Angel, it is not in me (Tess, p.263)."

Again, at Flintcomb Ash, Tess fails to stamp a meaningful pattern on the flow of time by a timely action, and thus, unwittingly invites more and more agonies and afflictions for her. She accepts blindly the arrogant complacency of Angel's brothers as a sure proof of his parents' snobbishness. This misconception and error of judgement become the arch stone of her tragic life in future. Her

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misguided consciousness shows that Tess is not yet accurate in her assessments. She still lives in a world of mental nebulousness and hazy perception. After her second meeting with Alec, a strange realisation overpowers Tess's mind that Alec alone, in a physical sense, is her husband. He comes to her help when the family is evicted from their parental house after the death of her father. She feels grateful to Alec for his assistance. Moreover, Angel himself told Tess that she belongs to Alec by virtue of copulation. By and by, she is made to realize by her illogical and hazy consciousness that her true identity lies outside the periphery of man-made morality, and in some greater natural order, it is the reality of copulation that establishes her as the wife, or, at any rate, the physical mate of Alec. Fumbling in the dark corridors of life, she comes around a stage where she abnegates her self at the altar of duty to her destitute family.

Very soon, Tess is made to revise and reconsider her evaluation of Angel when he returns to her repentant, changed and purged of his idealistic fastidiousness. Tess realizes that once again Alec D,urberville has succeeded in seducing her mentally, this time by inducing a realisation in her heart and mind that Angel would never come back to accept her. Now she repents her hasty decision. A new upsurge and a deep yearning "to achieve a felicitous wholeness of being" get hold of her and in a desperate effort to kill the situation; she kills Alec and demolishes the wall that stands between Angel and her. She chooses death to a

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mechanical life in which only body participates. Thus, Tess gets fulfilment in her union with Angel. She dies with a placid resignation, and calm serenity. Before death, she transcends the fear of death by a true upsurge of inner awakening. She knows that after a moment's illumination in which the truth of life is seen naked, there is no death. She gets real enlightenment which comes through attentive cultivation of inner values and self-awareness by way of caring communication of these inner-concerns for others. Standing on the highest stage of perfect consciousness, Tess beholds the tragic cyclic-pattern of life, and gladly accepts death, which alone can put an end to this cycle. Completely disillusioned and disenchanted, she does not want to be cheated by this renewed episode of happiness as she knows that it will not last long. A rare enlightenment illuminates her perception and she sees herself neither as "a soul" at large nor as "a fly entrapped between the blank gaze of earth and heaven", but as a person awakened and illumined to the realities of life. With consciousness fully awakened and evolved in her, Tess becomes, as Albert Lavalley says, "the prototype of a new and harmonious self that can meet the new age of skepticism" and one who has attained "a grandeur of human possibility" in coping with the world.Theoratically, Hardy underscores this very aspect of character analyasis as he evaluates the character of Tess: "The beauty or ugliness of character lay not in its achievements

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but in its aims and impulses; its true history lay not among things done but among things willed" (Tess, p. 310).

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