

Autobiographical Element of Thomas Hardy Worn in Tess of the d'Urbervilles

Dr Babita Tyagi, M.A, M.Phil., PhD

*Academician & Research Professional in English,
IMS Engineering College , Ghaziabad,
Affiliated to Dr. APJAKTU, Lucknow.
Emails: babita.tyagi@imsec.ac.in
babstyagi@gmail.com*

Abstract

This paper intensively discuss the autobiographical element of Thomas Hardy persuaded him to write his novel Tess of the d'Urbervilles. This is one of the most popular novels among the works of Thomas Hardy. This novel reflects Hardy's preoccupation with social class that continues through his novels. Hardy had connections with both working and the upper class, but felt that he is a part of none of the two. This is reflected in the pessimism behaviour contained in Tess of the d'Urbervilles toward the chances for Tess to ascend in society and Angel's precarious position as neither a member of the upper class nor a working person equivalent to his fellow milkers at Talbothays. The various problems and social evils like seduction reflected by Thomas Hardy express his agony towards the social norms. Again, like Angel Clare, Thomas Hardy found himself torn between different social spheres with which he could not fully align himself. Tess of the d'Urbervilles reflects that divide. The characters, places, plots and themes exhibited by Hardy are mostly based on his personal experiences.

Key Words

Autobiographical, Places, Durbeyfield, Character, Environment, Greek Tragedy, Places, Gothic Architecture, seduce, Christmas carols, Oxford movement, Gothic elements and culture, Marlott village

The novel also reflects Hardy's preoccupation with social class that continues through his novels. Hardy had connections to both the working and the upper class, but felt that he belonged to neither. This is reflected in the pessimism contained in Tess of the d'Urbervilles toward the chances for Tess to ascend in society and Angel's precarious position as neither a member of the upper class nor a working person equivalent to his fellow milkers at Talbothays. Again, like Angel Clare, Thomas Hardy found himself torn between different social spheres with which he could not fully align himself. Tess of the d'Urbervilles reflects that divide.

Tess of the d'Urbervilles, is one of the major works by Thomas Hardy published in nineteenth century work, but anticipates the twentieth century in regard to the nature and treatment of its subject matter. It was the twelfth published novel of Thomas Hardy. He started writing the novel in 1889 and it was actually presented as serialized in the Graphic from July to December in 1891. It was rejected by several periodicals. In December 1891, it was finally published as a novel. This novel raises question to society's sexual ethnicity by compassionately portraying a heroine who is seduced by the son of her employer and who thus is not considered a pure and chaste woman by the rest of society. Tess of the d'Urbervilles encountered brutally hostile reviews after publication. But in present days times it is considered as a major work of fiction of Thomas Hardy. The poor response of the society and readers

distracted Hardy from writing Novels. It led to his transition from Fiction writing to poetry writing. Nevertheless, the novel was commercially successful and assured Hardy's financial security.

Tess of the d'Urbervilles deals with several significant contemporary subjects for Hardy, including the struggles of religious belief that occurred during Hardy's lifetime. Hardy was largely influenced by the Oxford movement, a spiritual movement involving extremely devout thinking and actions. Hardy's family members were primarily orthodox Christians and Hardy himself considered entering the clergy, as did many of his relatives. Yet Hardy eventually abandoned his devout faith in God based on the scientific advances of his contemporaries, including most prominently Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. Hardy's own religious experiences can thus be seen in the character of Angel Clare, who resists the conservative religious beliefs of his parents to take a more religious and secular view of philosophy. This novel considerably enhanced Hardy's reputation as fiction writer. Perhaps it is his most popular work with the controversial subtitle, "A Pure Woman" It was first published in November 1891, and was considered the reiteration of theme of *The Woodlanders* with only slight difference. How an essentially good and natural character is destroyed by the combined forces of the society and circumstances is explained vividly in it. The episodes and characters of it are not completely invested with fictional qualities and have been to a great extent, drawn from the author's own life. The beauty and personal traits of the central figure of the narrative, Tess are after the author's grandmother, Mary Head. No wonder critics like Robert Gitting hold that Tess's figure is the very true picture of Hardy's Grandmother.

In fact, Hardy gives much attention to the fictional characters in their naming. Some of the characters are uniquely named and modelled after the real persons. Hardy himself admitted that one of the originals of the Angel Clare was his close friend Charles W Moule. Michael Millgate in his book *Thomas Hardy: A Biography* support this viewpoint and rightly remarks:

The naming of Angel Clare was particularly bold gesture on Hardy's part.....Hardy took Charles W Moule as his model for Angel, but he had told an interviewer in 1892 that Angel was a subtle poetical man of 'fastidious temperament'....

Similarly the name of Tess firmly establishes her essential dignity and also stresses that she is thought to be born as Durbeyfield. The fictional characters of Hardy are often based on his personal life and also the close study of Tess and Angel Clare provide evidences to this. Michael Millgate points out that Angel Clare was based certainly on several close acquaintances of Hardy. In this connection Michael Millgate in his book observes and stated:

An identification of Angel with Horace Moule gives more significance to the perceptible links between Angel and morally and sexually fastidious Henry Knight....

Hardy also prefers to make use of the contemporary incidents and changes occurring in the daily routine of Wessex. There is no ground to disbelieve that such incidents left an indelible impression on Hardy's mind. The episode of Prince's death is painted to highlight the poverty and grief graced by Tess's family. The truth of the poverty-stricken family of Tess has a distinct autobiographical touch, since

Hardy himself had undergone similar circumstances occur in the life of Tess, who also has an illegitimate son. The episode has for Tess the same social stigma and wrath of social forces which Mary Head had to face. The murder of Alec and the subsequent execution of Tess remind and social happenings seen or heard by Hardy. The author had witnessed that a certain lady, who had killed her husband, was given the capital punishment and was executed publicly. Probably such an incident prompted Hardy to use this murder and execution episode in the story. The manners and life style of the Wessex rustics were as sophisticated as those of the aristocrats of London. Hardy got motivated to develop his characters in a particular mode of those aristocrats. He, himself belonged to a deserted place, but had contacts in London.

Hardy familiarizes the readers and the people of his age with the Gothic elements and culture. This leads us to believe that the landscapes presented are the places known to him. He modifies such places according to the demand of art. Critics agree that he has been successful in uniting the empirical ideas with the autobiographical facts. The village Marlott is the complete transfiguration of Shaston. Robert Gittings in the book *The Older Thomas Hardy* points to this in these words:

Hardy for some reason as yet undisclosed... specific of rural landscape and contrasting it with another. The second characteristic of each of these descriptions of the vale is that they are compared with one another landscape....

In the preface to the novel, Hardy provides his readers with the list of the names of ancient places and buildings used by him in his writings, characters, places, architectural designs and other episodes like public execution, seduction, etc., are mostly the outcome of the social crises of that time. He introduces the reader to the real persons and places of his time.

Hardy's inherit interest in music from his ancestral family. His father and grandfather were the members of the choir groups and acted instrumentalists. His father played violin in church. His diary entries reveal that his parents actively participated in the musical activities on festive occasions. Ballads, dance parties and many such other things were firmly embedded in his fancy. Several musical occasions, dance-parties as 'May-Day Dance Party' reveal author's infatuation for musical occasions. Dance parties reveal author's infatuation for musical occasions. Dance parties reveal author's infatuation for music in JC Brown Words Preface written to the book *Let me Enjoy Earth*. He stated:

Hardy himself recorded how as a child of four or five music used to make him cry, causing him to dance frantically to hide his tears; and hymns, psalm and country dance-tunes reminded of his thoughts all his life. But beyond this his life and writings show that for country people whose days were hard and who lacked cultural opportunities, music whether in church or at dance...'

The 'May-Day Dance Party' also known as club-walking is depicted in the novel as a musical festive occasion. He presents a detailed view of this party and hints at the manner in which working people enjoy their life. The May-Day Dance exhibits Hardy's observation of traditional and festive trends. Critical writers like Douglas Brown admits that such type of dancers and ballads communicate the rustic traditional values and the recognition of seasonal rhythms. He always talked of music through the

medium of central figure to give distinct recognition to it in his stories. His keen interest in poetry made him have a poetic approach to his fictional writing. Musical as well as poetical words like dangling, whining, plumed etc. tell the movement of various objects. He embellished the natural elements by using for them poetic phrases. He sometimes gave poetic language to his thoughts. By the time he came to write this tale he had been introduced to the world of poetry. Angel Clare views Tess from a lover's angle and poetically praises her as different from the other dairy maids working there. Hardy expresses his interest in poetry by making use of poetically praises her as different from the other dairy-maids working there. Hardy expresses his interest in poetry by making use of poetical phrases. He also quotes from different and well known poets like Walt Whitman or Milton. Tess is overwhelmed by the praise and agrees to marry him. Alec compares Tess with Eve and compares the situation to 'satanic paradise'. Hardy quotes Milton's lines which make an elaborate description and appealing situation. He produces the sensitive situations with poetic phrases. The poetic description of various objects and situations make the novel more appealing and illustrates Hardy's passion for poetry. Thus all this shows his deep personal interest in poetry-writing which later on he adopts as his permanent passion and profession. The cumulative effect of emotion, passion and poetry renders this novel highly autobiographical.

Tess of the d'Urbervilles belongs to the class of the Novels of Character and Environment'. This classification is justifiable because the main characters of the novel mostly belong to some village or nearby places. The novel comprises the varied changing situations related to village and its people. Nature and its elements are abundantly used. The story of this novel is built on changing seasons, its varying moods and alternating situations. The use of Nature and its elements makes an indispensable part of it and contribute to the success of this work. Some critics call Tess of the d'Urbervilles as a pastoral romance of which Nature is an influential ingredient. Lance St. John Butler holds the view that the story is a pastoral romance and has natural background. Hardy interprets nature in relation to man and his realization of bitterness. In some places he presents so marvellous description of nature that the scenic beauty of landscapes is laid naked before the reader's eye. The valley is artistically described by F B Pinion in his book Thomas Hardy as:

... in the valley, the world seems to be constructed upon a smaller and more delicate scale; the fields are mere paddocks, so reduced that from this height their hedgerows appear a network of dark green threads overspreading the paler green of the grass.

In giving vivid description of such a simple valley the artistic words as languorous, deepest ultramarine, etc are used. He recalls old valleys and cliffs which had been visited by him many a time in Dorchester and London. Fictional places sketched in the novel were based on Wessex. In Tess, Hardy reconstructs the spirit of thorough involvement. The preparatory sites of fair and Nature decorated with its fresh new beauty and fauna appear amusing. Nature takes the hue of man's varying moods. It looks happy and morose, according to the situation in which a particular character feels happy or otherwise. Tess's cheerfulness at her union with Angel Clare is reflected in nature:

... the trees were just as green as before; the birds sang and the sun shone as clearly now as ever. The familiar surroundings had not darkened because of her grief, nor sickened because of her pain.

The death of the horse Prince leads the family into poverty. The horse was the only support of their family. Hardy had great love for lower animals. He was no less conversant with the manners of animals. Here the death of a horse has far-reaching impact on a whole family, thus presenting the close relation between the world of man and nature.

The autobiographical element is explicit in the delineation of dairy-making', which Hardy had witnessed with his father employed in dairy-making. This inspired him to put his characters into such a profession. Dairy-making is purely a rural occupation, and so it is carried out in the midst of natural phenomena.

The illness of John Durbeyfield and the declining financial conditions of the family press Tess seek employment at a very young age. The elaborate processes of farming like reaping, binding trimming, threshing, reed-drawing, and milk-drawing, etc, have been dealt the great fidelity. He shows that the new methods and machines were becoming more and more popular with the farmers. The modern machines are detailed by the author in his novel Tess of the d'Urbervilles lists as follows:

The reaping-machine left the fallen corn behind it in little heaps, each heap being quantity for a sheaf; and upon these the active binders in the rear laid their hands. Mainly women....

Hardy is using his observations when he describes Tess and angel working on Flint comb Ash Farm with the help of modern methods. Hardy saw closely the farmers working on the fields at Dorchester, where his father used to work on a farm. There Hardy also worked with his father. He noticed tremendous advancement in agriculture, engendered by the introduction of new machines and techniques. However, the introduction of machines brought fruitful results but only superficially because it also brought grim poverty. That was why the rustics were not ready to accept the restoration. Annoyance of rustics towards machines is quite understandable. They were not very enthusiastic and still maintain to work with the same manual proficiency as before. Hardy describes Tess's clothes which she wears while working on farm at Marlott as a dairymaid. The dresscode of workers make them look perfect professionals. Hardy pays special attention to Tess's dress when she works at Talbothays. The truthful and convincing picture of Wessex rural life could be possible because of his deep attachment with it. It was his native place. The presentation of rustic people in their respective professions wearing the dress code is a proof of his infallible observation.

The description of buildings and places is not uncommon in his novels. They are described professionally because he was an expert architect and the son of master-mason. Hardy offers pictorial view of various places like inns, valleys, towns, cities and churches. It is found that the places are very much similar in their appearance. They are just presented with the different names and certain modifications in architectural appearance. Hardy in the introductory preface to the novel discloses the original places on which he bases the fictional places as described by Thomas Hardy in his novel:

...places described under fictitious are ancient names—for reasons that seemed good at the time of writing...such as Shaftsbury in Shaston, Surminster Newton in Stourcastle, Dorchester in Casterbridge, Salisbury in Melchester, Salisbury Plain in the Great Plain, Cranborne in Chaseborough, Cranebourne chase in The Chase, Beaminster.....Winchester in Winstonchester and so on.

The village and towns are astonishingly realistic and make an instantaneous appeal to the reader. The phrases pertaining to its location such as, North-eastern undulation engirdled and secluded region 'tourist or landscape painter and others tend to lend a definite shape and location to Marlott village. The topographical picture of Marlott as offered by him is untouched by the advancement afoot in the rural areas. Various inns and churches are also present in and along the cities and villages. He presents The Pure drop Inn, The Rolliver's Inn. The decoration and architectural view remind us of the vivid view of the Inn existing at his own time. The Inns at that time were the community centres. These places were meant for merry making and drinking for persons of all status. They also served as the resting places for the strangers. The buildings were so designed that they attracted the strangers and provided them complete enjoyment. The architectural view presented the impression of their being Roman and Gothic. Hardy has given a distinguished and rustic view of Blackmoor where Tess goes for dairy farming to give a new start to life after her seduction. The various places shown in the novel have remarkable resemblance with Hardy's Wessex. The autobiographical element is resonant throughout his description of buildings and landscapes.

Hardy had travelled a lot in his lifetime with different family members as well as alone. He started his first journey at the age of eight with his mother. He had many chances to travel with his friends or alone by various modes for short and long distances. Travelling gave him wide views of places, people and their attitudes, cultural traditions and professions. Being born in village, he observed a totally changed environment in cities and towns, while travelling he felt that the rural areas took an extended period of time to accept advancement, while it was easily accepted in cities. The architectural structure of church present in the novel shows that his sketch is based on Stinsford church. For the idea of drawing these sketches he especially indebted to old English architecture. The cursory view of an ordinary church tower is enough to show the efficacy that he possessed as an observer. Hardy caught glimpses of churches whenever he used to travel there. He visited Stinsford Church even in his old age and recalled various persons he had met there. Thus it is revealed that his professional passion is invariably seen in the novel in the architectural details of various churches and house buildings.

The plot of our novel is the succession of coincidences. The tragic fate leads Tess to mischievous happening. The preponderant fate harassed Tess so much so that novel is rightly categorised as tragic novel. This novel reveals author's wide view of life which was shaped by prevalent materialistic and deterministic theories of 19th century. All the actions are predestined to happen in a peculiar way. Shakespeare tragic ideas of King Lear etc. and the tragic view of Greek writers Aeschylus and Sophocles' found a deep resonance in his heart. Hardy had in his mind the impressions of tragic

thoughts of Shakespeare and Sophocles and some tragic experiences of his life, when he sat to construct Tess's character in the novel. Some of Tess's tragedy is in a way Desdemona's Tragedy.

Hardy makes his readers believe that the story of this novel is the portrayal of Mary Head, the novelist's grandmother. Her life was not so easy. She had to face trials and tribulations owing to social apathy and poverty. Tess troubles are much more disastrous and stupefying than those of the author's grandmother. The death of horse Prince brings in strain, poverty in the life of Tess and her family members. No other alternative is left to choice than to support a whole family on the verge of starvation. There during her days of strenuous labours she meets Angel. The sketch of the downfall of the ancestral family of Tess, as worded by Hardy is the portrayal of tragic downfall. When things are going well for Tess, in the last days of her courtship at Talbothays, she puts together her sense of the ominous and her old testament conception of retributive justice in a way that adds to the tragic picture of the world where no absolution is possible. Hardy's past adumbrates his future. He comes to form such a dismal view from his personal and family experiences.

In Tess, Hardy is telling an excruciating tale of unmitigated suffering, a tale in which human struggle is crushed to naught by an imminent insidious destiny. We are left with an untimely, insidious destiny. We are left with an ultimately tragic story which shows that the struggle is between man and the way things exist and occur. The novel is not based on any historical truths or facts, yet it does not escape the element of history totally. These historical traits are not related to any noble people, but exhibit the ancestral truths of Tess and Angel's family. The downfall of the ancestral families decides the temper of the story. Hardy happened to observe or hear the tales of the downfall of Victorian families. To Tess, Hardy adds the name of D'Urbervilles. The downfall of this ancestral family is worded with the help of cosmic canvas in the novel. Hardy writes in his book in the introductory pages of the novel as:

... the theme of villain and heroine sharing one apparent lineage, the whole ancestral d'Urbervilles background simply does not exist. Her original surname was Woodrow, his Hawforne; and incidentally, though his Christian name was Alec...

The decay of the ancestral families plunges the members into such a hopeless condition as they have to step out of doors to work with other smaller people in order to meet their requirements. The description of Tess's ancestral family is shown in chapter 3 and 4 of the novel. The ancestral detail is that Durbeyfield used to be the greatest gentfolk in the whole country. They were considered to the Royal Oak at one time; Tess paints not only the family pedigree of the heroine's mother's family but also gives a beautiful picturesque painting of her father's house. It gives a royal look. The dates and incidents are memorized by it. Though not interested in history as such, He undoubtedly drew inspiration from things historical in nature and used them in his works with such marvellous success. The figure of Alec as sketched by Hardy presents the social charm of Victorian age, Alec in comparison with Tess and Angel Clare possesses less interesting and unpredictable qualities. Alec is the offspring of Mr. Simon who has retired from business and has adopted the name of d'Urberville to acquire country status. Alec is a libertine, with satanic associations, but not totally devoid of redeeming features. His

father has lately died, and he lives with his blind mother at the slopes near Trantridge. He is a villainous figure in the novel. Critics hold that Hardy wished to show the various kinds of evils and vice flourishing in the society through such portraits. All social evils are symbolized in Alec. The great part of Angel's life is a sketch portrayal of Charles and Horace. Thus we find Angel's character to be very personal to Hardy.

Two other episodes which appear to be very close to Hardy's life are the murder of Alec by Tess and then the execution of Tess. F.E Hardy and later on Millgate supported this fact. One year before Hardy started the writing of this novel, he happened to see death of many persons. This left an indelible impression on his mind. Death of Helen Mathews, an actress, and the tragic end of his mother's sister, Aunt Mary Antell, for whom he felt deep infatuation, dealt a deadly blow to his sentiments. These deaths left a shocking impression on Hardy's mind and led to spiritual imbalance. He was so much shocked that he took the death very seriously.

The murder of Alec by Tess is considered a justified action. She feels that in all Alec deserved such a punishment for his crime against modesty and morality and breaking the faith of an innocent girl. During his time, Hardy had heard death sentence as a punishment for a crime like seduction. His sense of justice is fulfilled by the punishment given to Alec by Tess. To eradicate evil and crime symbolised in Alec, he is to be banished from the society, such punishment could be given only by somebody either irreparably outraged or conscientious or brave, Hardy writes with poignant irony about Tess's undeserved punishment.

Hardy had many bitter experiences of class discrimination in his life. It was this that made him suffer prangs of sorrow in his first love. However, even after his second marriage he could not wipe out his memory. The sweet memories of his wife lingered in his novel and coloured many amorous moment. The love tangles in the novel are despite of class, religion and region. In the beginning Tess is easily enticed by Alec by his ostentations and persuasive manners. But her bewitchment meets its end when she is seduced by him and then discarded. She is left with no option other than changing her place. Her marriage with an Angel comes to an abrupt end because after knowing the relation between Alec and Tess, Angel leaves her and goes to Brazil. Circumstances again bring Alec and Tess together. Again Alec plays a mischievous trick. This action of Alec hurts the feelings of Tess, and she murders him.

Tess, the central female figure in the novel, is connected with all actions taking place in the story. Abundant similarity lays Tess and female figures of Hardy's family. F B Pinion in his book Thomas Hardy points out personal element in her character that:

The name was suggested by that of Hardy's cousin. Teresa Hardy, who lived at Higher Bockhampton. When the novel was published she told Hermann Lea that the main episodes happened to a relative of theirs'. Another of Hardy's cousins(Who lived in Puddletown) stated that Tess's life and adventures are final death are practically what happened to relative of ours.

Critics like Millgate and Gittings in his book *Thomas Hardy: The Older Thomas Hardy* also agree to this fact in their writings. Millgate suggests that:

...Hardy was to recognise in a young local actress named Gertrude Bugler a striking physical resemblance to Tess Durbeyfield as she had so long existed in his mind....Mrs. Bugler's mother, Augusta Way, seen working as a milkmaid on Kingston Maurward estate, who had first suggested that figure of Tess to his imagination.

Hardy draws the character of Tess from the impressions of beauty and actions which he bore on his mind after seeing the actress Gertrude. The resemblance of both Tess and Hardy's Grandmother is that both belong to well known families to ruin. The number of brother and sisters is also the same. Childhood of both of them is spent in poverty. Experiences of his grandmother during the days of poverty are similar to those of Tess. The downfall of aristocratic families is recalled in the downfall of Tess's family. Mary Head was seduced and gave birth to a child. Circumstances assume a destructive role in Tess's life when she is seduced by Alec and she also gives birth to a child. The Baptization of the child of Tess is similar to that of Mary Head's child in Fawley on October 30, 1972.

After her physical violence and desertion by Angel, Tess struggles to give a new start to her life. She changes her place and solves the twin aims of helping her family and giving a new start to her life at Talbothays. The new conditions in the cases of both Tess and Mary Head are similar. Mary Head shifted to Berkshire from Dorset and there she married Hardy's grandfather. Likewise, Tess moves from Marlott to The slopes then to Talbothays, where she meets Angel Clare and marries him.

Hardy was dissatisfied with his married life as Tess was with hers. She is sketched as a woman of high principles. Her simplicity, innocence, credulity, uncomplaining surrenders to the cruel dispensation of destiny raise her to a great height of glory. She is Hardy's most polished and assiduously worked out character based on his personal memories. She is said to be drawn on Hardy's grandmother.

Hardy was not untouched by the religious beliefs. Various interesting festive occasions related to religious rites and ceremonies like baptismation show his holy interest. Christianity looms large in Tess, not directly but in sorry state of Tess. Her natural paganism and sufferings combine with Angel's sceptical teaching to bring her to intellectual point are identical to Hardy's view. Hardy's passion for churches and belief in Christianity are seen throughout the novel. This leads to believe that he made abundant use of his personal life experiences while writing the story.

Works cited and consulted

- Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Australia: Thomson and Heine. 1999.
- Draper, R P, *Thomas Hardy: Three Pastoral novels*, London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1975.
- Draper, R P, *Thomas Hardy: The Tragic novels* London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1987.
- Gittings, Robert. *The Older Thomas Hardy* London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1992
- Halliday, FE, *Thomas Hardy: His life and works*, London; Adams and Dart, 1972.
- Hardy, Thomas: *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1994)

Hardy, Florence Emily, Thomas Hardy: His Early and Later Years of Life, London: London University Press, 1987.

Millgate, Michael, Thomas Hardy: A Biography, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.

Norman Page, Thomas Hardy, London; Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1982

Orel, Harold, The unknown Thomas Hardy, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987.

Page, Norman, Thomas Hardy, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1977.

Pinion, F B, Thomas Hardy: His Life and Friends, London: Macmillan 1992.

Purdy, Richard Little, Thomas Hardy: A Bibliographical Study, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968.