



# Thomas Hardy: A Critique of Victorian Society

Naveen Kumar,

Assistant Professor

Geeta Degree College, Shera (Panipat)

## Abstract:

Thomas Hardy was an English novelist and poet, widely regarded as one of the most significant figures in English Literature including Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Emily Bronte, and George Meredith. He wrote many popular novels, poems, and essays during his literary life. He was influenced by the poetry of Romanticism and especially by William Wordsworth. His writing refers to him as a high critique of Victorian age. He spoke openly for the rights of middle-class people values, beliefs, tradition, and declining status of rural people in Britain. He is known for his realistic portrayal of rural England his poignant characterization and his exploration of the themes of fate, destiny, and the struggles of individuals against the vehement forces of society. Not only his novels but also his poetry depicted the harsh realities of Victorian abnormal society addressing issues, such as social class marriage and the changing rural landscape. Hardy wrote in a great variety of poetic forms including satire dramatic monologues, lyrics, ballads, and three-volume epic closet drama. The Dynast (1904-1908).

**Keywords:** Society tradition, Abolition, Morality, Religion

In a step towards his novels and literary texts, we find that he was much critiquing of absurd norms of Victorian society. He always expressed his dissatisfaction with the rigid moral code in the Victorian age. The rigid moral code refers to the set of strict moral and social standards that governed the behavior and expectation of individuals in society. It encompassed a range of values and beliefs that were deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric of the time. In Literature the rigid moral code was often depicted and critiqued. He spoke against sexual purity and suppression of sexual desires in his novels. The concept of conformity and non-conformity was described in the sense of moral prejudice in the Victorian era. It is a matter of debate that why Hardy is so much affected by the gender roles and biases at that age. Victorian society enforced rigid gender roles, with clear expectations for men and women. From a traditionalist point of view, men were expected to be strong rational, and assertive while women were depicted as daughters of nature submissive to husbands and devotees to domestic principles. Sexual topics were considered taboo and discussion or portrayal of these taboos were heavily censored. In Victorian Society, religion played a major role to design and shape to religious consciousness of humans. Society placed great importance on religious observance moral righteousness and the pursuit of spiritual salvation Literature often Portrayed Characters wrestling with religious faith moral dilemmas and the conflict between personal desires and religious expectations. This Victorian moral code emphasized social hierarchy and class differentiation Right to vote for the upper class and landowner while the lower class

was often seen as stigmatized, marginalized, and judged. That's why literature critiqued the hypocrisy of the upper class and shed light on the struggle faced by characters from lower starter

Some characteristics of the Victorian rigid moral code are as follows:

- Sexual Repression
- Social Conformity
- Gender roles and expectations
- Respectability and Reputation
- Religion and piety
- Social Hierarchy and class Division

If we described this age chronologically Victorian era in British history the period between approximately 1820 and 1914 corresponds roughly but not exactly to the period of seven Victoria's reign (1831-1901). Susie Steinbach wrote about this age and said that this was characterized by a class-based society a growing number of people able to vote a growing state and economy and Britain's status as the most powerful nation in the world.

Thomas Hardy was a stern realist and many writers and critics of this age labeled him "Victorian Commentator" because Hardy examines and evaluates the social constants on the lives of those living in Victorian England. He criticized those beliefs, especially relating to marriage education and religion that limited people's lives and caused unhappiness. This unhappiness and suffering are seen by the great poet Philip Larkin as central to Hardy's works "What is the intensely maturing experience of which Hardy modern man is most sensible? In my view, it is suffering or sadness and extended consideration of the centrality of suffering in Hardy's work should be the first duty of the truth for which work is still waiting ." (Philip Larkin,1983)

Hardy was always against the rules of the story which bounded human freedom. He was always critical of the boundaries of class. Nineteenth-century society had conventions which were. In his novel, "Two on a Tower" Swithin. St. Cleeve's idealism pite him against such contemporary social constraints."In a novel structured around contrast, the main opposition is between Swithin St. Cleeve and Lady Viviette Constantine, who are presented as binary figures in a series of ways aristocratic and lower class youthful and mature, single and married fair and dark, religious and agnostic\_\_\_\_" She is also deeply conventional, absurdly wishing to conceal their marriage until Swithin has achieved social status through his scientific work, which gives rise to uncontrolled ironies and tragic-comic misunderstandings"(Harvey 2003,108 )

Thomas Hardy reveals many significant acts of criticism of Victorian society in his three great " Wessex" novels including Far from the Madding Crowd, Tess of the d'Urberville, and Jude the Obscure. Despite scientific advances and industrial progress, Hardy must criticize Victorian England. In his novel" Far From Madding Crowd", he wrote that by marriage woman becomes the husband's property, but if the woman wants to be married she has to accept it: "Baldwood, as means to marriage, was unexceptionable, she esteemed and liked him. Yet she did not want him. It appears that ordinary men take wives because possession is not possible without marriage and that ordinary women accept husbands because marriage is not possible without possession".(Hardy 2008,195)

Although Bathsheba is different and she does not want to become someone's property. This shows Hardy's stance on the class system and values of Victorian English society. The concept of women's dependence described by Hardy is as realistic as in a Utopian society. "Hardy describes her as a woman whose independence from men is necessary to her sense of identity, and who regards marriage as literally a degrading sacrifice of self. However, ultimately it is her passion for Troy which leads her to marry him". (Hardy 2010,120-124)

In Tess of d'Urbeville, Tess is described as a young, honest nice girl with "big eyes of penny lips. She is also resilient to all obstacles that her fate has set (rape and death of her child). The two main themes that are portrayed are gender inequality and the class system. The author wrote in the preface to the first edition, "I will just add that the story is sent out in all sincerity of purpose as an attempt to give artistic form to a true sequence of things, and in respect of the book's opinion and sentiments, I would ask any too genteel reader..." (Hardy 2010,155)

The last novel, Jude the Obscure published in 1895 this novel caused even more debate than the previous one. The Victorian public criticized this novel for its controversial treatment of sex, religion, and marriage. The main character is Fawley, a boy from a poor family. In contrast, Sue Bridehead represents a modern woman, whose central privilege is not being married as the rest of the women. Another significant theme of the novel is that criticism is a system that does not allow the education of lower social classes, even if they have certain aspirations. In the letter of rejection sent by Mr. Tetupheneay, the letters contempt of the working class is obvious. "I have read your letter with interest judging from your description of yourself as a working man. I venture to think that you will have a much better chance of success in life by remaining in your sphere and sticking to your trade than by adopting any other course. That, therefore, is what I advise you to do". (Hardy 1995,210)

### Conclusion:

In Conclusion, Thomas Hardy's novels stand as a powerful critic of Victorian society, reflecting the profound societal changes and challenges of the time. Through this unique story-telling and vivid characterization Hardy delves into the complexities of Victorian society, exposing its flaws, injustice, and hypocrisy. He highlighted the stark division between the wealthy elite and lower classes depicting the struggles and limitations faced by those trapped in the lower rungs of society. Through his literary endeavor, Thomas Hardy emerges as a keen observer and critique of Victorian society.

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