

Reclaiming Nature and Womanhood in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*: An Ecofeminist Perspective

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Abstract:

Ecofeminism, alternatively called **Ecological feminism**, is that branch of [Feminism](#) which examines the interconnectedness between women and nature. Its name was coined by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974. This branch of Feminism focuses on how both nature and women are treated by the [patriarchal lens](#) or male-centred society. Ecofeminists examine the effect of gender biases to demonstrate how social norms cast unjust dominance and exploitation over women and nature. Ecofeminism also insists that these norms lead to an incomplete, misleading and unjust view of the world. Therefore, its practitioners advocate a reverse worldview that values the earth as sacred, recognizes humanity's dependency on the natural world, and embraces all life as precious.

Ecofeminism is a newly found term in the field of literary criticism that insists on the notion that both women and nature are exploited by the patriarchal society and it disenfranchises the sole ownership of male authority. There were several writers before Françoise d'Eaubonne, who had discussed this concept without giving it a proper name 'Ecofeminism'. Among these writers, one of the universally acknowledged and highly controversial novelists, poets and social commentators of the Victorian era, Thomas Hardy, has the mastery in creating rural characters and depicting country life. Most of his novels project him as a keen observer of the great chord once found between nature and human beings. Thomas Hardy in his novels is concerned with such kind of ecofeminism, for his female characters are the victims of the physical nature. This research paper focuses on the facts that are responsible for the subjugation and exploitation of females in connection with nature in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Hence it provides a perspective for exploitation of body and place. Such a relationship between women and the environment is a pivotal issue in Hardy's novels.

Key Words:

Wessex, Interconnectedness, Patriarchy, Sustainability, Ecofeminism, Eco criticism.

Thomas Hardy's fiction presents a way of looking at Victorian society and culture. He is the creator of immortal Wessex and some immortal characters on the pages of literary history. He presents a gloomy picture of the universe and man's helplessness against natural forces shaping his destiny. He has imparted a universal appeal to a confined reason called Wessex. As a novelist, he has many astonishing ideas regarding modern times. This paper focuses on

the current debate about sustainability and Hardy's belief in interconnectedness. He has a sceptic view of the modern advancement of science and technology and scientific civilisation. His old Wessex is unaffected by modern science and technology and natives therein are happy with their pagan mindset, poverty and simple way of living. But these poor, rustic dwellers are disturbed by the new technology used in New Wessex and machines brought by sophisticated people in the village. These newly explored technologies forced them to change their mode of living and broke the harmony once felt between man and nature, leading to a tragic end. His belief in one great chord leads toward affinity between life and ecology. This paper is an attempt to explore Hardy's imaginative realisation which is responsible for mutual co-existence in his novels. Eco-feminism is a very recent term in the field of literary criticism that combines Feminism and Eco criticism. The French feminist Francoise d'Eaubonne has coined the term Ecofeminism in her book *Le Féminisme Ou la Mort* (1974). According to her "The disenfranchisement and oppression of women, people of colour and the poor are intrinsically linked to the degradation of the natural world as both arose as a result of patriarchal dominance" (mbgplanet). Patriarchy which asserts the rights of males has "led to the degradation of nature land and animals along with the marginalisation of groups including but not limited to women, children and people of colour" (Regan). Further capitalism has aggravated the oppression of women as it insists only on productivity at any cost and that is why it does not value many attributes having feminine qualities including nature itself. Thomas Hardy has the mastery in portraying marginalised female characters who are part of male dominance or subjugation in all his novels. He shows how the Victorian progress of science and technology disproportionate females of the society declining their rights in every field.

Hardy is also a cognizant observer of the progressive methods of newly found technologies that are causing great harm to natural phenomena. Female anatomy is more close to nature than male. That is why the ruthless cutting of the jungles and the devastation of natural vegetation seem to symbolise the exploitation of the female body and their rights. Thomas Hardy is concerned in his novels with such kind of ecofeminism, for his female characters are victims of the physical nature. Nature in his works is not a passive element. Nature provides more than a mere background often it is a protagonist in the story an unfeeling impersonal force exerting its influence upon the lives of the characters. This research paper tries to investigate the facts that are responsible for the subjugation and exploitation of the females in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* in connection with nature hence providing a perspective for exploiting body and place. Such a relationship between women and the environment is a pivotal issue in Hardy's novels. During the Victorian period, both females and nature were treated brutally. On the one side growing economy was inciting the ruthless cutting of the jungles on the other side new areas opened for working women were a place of exploitation of their bodies and souls. Corruption was a common feature in the general scenario. A man starts his journey with nature and ends it in the lap of nature, yet nature remained for the most part a victim of exploitation in the long run of human history. The current global crises like global warming, deforestation, climate change, food and water insecurities, acidification of oceans etc. need an investigation of different manners in which writers like Thomas Hardy try to show man's relationship with nature in his works and how he

ties it to feminist dynamics. Ecofeminism is the combination of feminist and eco-critical reading. Feminist criticism challenges a patriarchal society in which every right is reserved for males. Eco criticism/Green studies resist the devastation of the natural ecosystem through human activities. Now eco feminism combining two concepts studies the relationship between women and the natural environment. This concept tries to explore the unfathomed relationship among nature, women and men in literary works. It affirms the inherent connection between women and nature in which women rather than men are more sensitive to observe themselves as a part of nature. In a patriarchal society, women have shared the same pathetic fate as nature in human civilisation which proves to be alienated and otherized. Thus eco feminists hope to arouse people's ecological awareness as well as gender equality, longing for a tolerant society in which harmony maintains among nature women and men. Annette Kolodny an American Ecofeminist, literary critic, activist and humanities professor, in her two books: *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (1975), tries to show how male-authored literature, presents the gendering of the land as female, and the accordant tendency to resort to nature for pastoral repose, recuperation, and gratification. She further draws a parallel between the domination and subjugation of women and the exploitation and spoliation of the land (Abrams 83). With the research boom in the field of eco-feminism in recent years scholars have focused their attention on reevaluating literary classics. In these classics, Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is of great importance. This novel reveals Hardy's idea of ecofeminism in his views and his portrayal of women and nature. In the works of Hardy nature and women share common features and he presents a humanistic approach even though to non-human entities. The industrial revolution and the steam power machine seem to violate the natural rights of equality and safety for both women and nature in the Victorian era. These so-called steam-powered machines provided a background for the exploitation of women and nature as they paved the way for the devastation of the natural and pastoral world of Wessex and provided a shelter for working women's physical and mental exploitation. Thomas Hardy exposes this joint enslaving of the land and female body from an eco-feminist perspective.

In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, women had a mysterious affinity with nature, the intrinsic nature of the women conceiving and raising lives endowed the women a unique intimacy with the earth which is the mother of all living things in the world. In the novel, Hardy earnestly builds a profound relationship between women and nature, his eco-feminist consciousness is fully revealed in his heroine Tess. She is the protagonist of the novel. Tess' close affinity with nature is firstly embodied in her naturally beautiful appearance. Tess belonged to nature by birth, she was born as the daughter of nature while being tortured by the patriarchal society and the male-dominated world. Since her first appearance in the novel, the image of Tess has aroused heated discussions because Hardy referred to her as "a pure woman" on the earth. However, no one denied the fact that Tess distinguished herself from the usual secular girls by her authenticity and naturalistic beauty.

Her natural beauty is embodied in every part of her body. Tess makes her first debut in the novel as a dancer in the "club-walking" of the village. In the band of beautiful young girls, Tess is outstanding in her own natural way. She is an elegant, beautiful girl - not more beautiful than some others, possibly - but her mobile peony mouth and large innocent eyes

add eloquence to her colour and shape. She wears a red ribbon in her hair and is the only one in the white company who can boast of such a conspicuous embellishment. The red ribbon distinguishes Tess from other country girls in the band, however, only a small minority of people, mainly the strangers would not be fascinated by Tess' natural freshness, and admires her beauty. Her childlike heart is blended into her mature female body which adds charm to her beauty. Phases of her childhood lurked in her aspect still. As she walked along today, for her bouncing handsome womanliness, you could sometimes see her twelfth year in her cheeks, or her ninth sparkling from her eyes; and even her fifth would flit over the curves. Tess is just like a beautiful fairy who stumbled into the earthly world. Every part of her body belongs to nature and is in harmony with nature, Tess is the daughter of nature. Tess' close similarity with nature is then embodied in her personality. On the one hand, Tess is tolerant and docile as any female in the patriarchal society, however, on the other hand, Tess is bold and defiant. Being hardworking and tolerant, Tess has an innate ability to do various kinds of farm work. As a daughter of nature, she interacts with nature through the tough farm work, she is born in nature and also lives by nature. She supports herself and her family by working hard in one field after another, and Tess' abilities in the farm work are endowed by nature which also proves Tess' identity as the daughter of nature. Besides, she can only find peace and comfort in doing the rough field work, and only in nature can she be her true self. In the novel, Hardy presents a mysterious relationship between Tess and nature. The uncanny force stored in Tess' tiny little body inspires the readers to explore the further deep connections between Tess and nature. Tess is compared to a weak plant, fragile yet unyielding. Although life is harsh and tough, Tess never gives up, she keeps on fighting for a better life. The destructions that life brought upon her can be converted into a mysterious spirit that helps her overcome all kinds of difficulties and hardships. After temporary rest and recovery, Tess can gain strength and wait for spring to come. Although Tess suffers a lot, she never gives up hope, she holds a firm belief that she can revive and regain her strength very soon. Furthermore, Tess, as a daughter of nature, relies too much on nature where she can find comfort and peace. In the novel, Tess is very sensitive to nature and has her own understanding of nature. She is unwilling to socialise with other human beings out of horror and dread while she alienates herself in nature to be at ease. For Tess, nature is safe and comfortable, and she firmly believes that pain and hardships will disappear with the alteration of day and night. As the sun rises from the east on a new morning, she would gain all the strength and energy to live in the world. Once in the novel, she intentionally isolates herself in the woods for a long time while all the people think she has gone forever, she only chooses to step out from the woods after dark. In the woods, she fully freed herself and gained all the vigour and strength from nature to fight against all the hardships in real life.

She is continuously oppressed by various men in her life. As the novel progresses Tess ultimately loses her life to free herself from the bondage of patriarchal society and its norms pervading throughout the Victorian era. Tess' death stands out as a symbolical metaphor for the destruction and exploitation of body and land, for Tess is a part of the natural world of Wessex or more accurately the daughter of nature same as Wordsworth's Lucy Gray. According to Hardy women are parts of nature and nature, is the enlargement of women. An eco-feminist mindset is also visible when Hardy depicts the natural world acting with the

conditions of women. When Tess becomes Pregnant after an enforced rape she is condemned by patriarchal society's inflexible values. While her rapist cheerfully goes on with his life without any shame or remorse. Nature at this moment reflects itself in the dark shade, creating confusion and fear. This is the dark in which Tess takes frequent walks to be free from the sense of shame accompanying her pregnancy. She feels as if nature is reprimanding her: "walking among the sleeping birds in the hedge, watching the skipping rabbits on a moonlight warren, or standing under a pheasant-laden bough, she looked upon herself as a figure of guilt intruding into the haunts of innocence" (Hardy,103). Hardy insists that Tess is in complete accordance with nature. She is the part of nature for which nature also laments through her various moods, "But all the while she was making a distinction where there was no difference. Feeling herself in antagonism she was quite in accord. She had been made to break an accepted social law, but no law known to the environment in which she fancied herself such an anomaly" (Hardy,103). Hardy makes it clear that Tess has merely broken the law made by society not applied to the natural world in any real way. He firmly believes that the moral codes and conducts imposed on us by patriarchy are failures as they judge two different personalities by two different parameters.

Hardy himself likely looked at the world from much the same perspective as that shared by his narrator and Tess, seeing all living beings interconnected to the larger natural world but with a delicate balance requiring propriety of action on the part of humans if nature is not to be damaged severely or destroyed. Unfortunately for Tess's character, the world she inhabits is far from this ideal, and in addition to her miseries suffered due to patriarchal oppression, she must repeatedly witness the misuse and destruction of the very parts of nature she thinks of as composing a massive family to which she belongs. Hardy lived in a world very similar to that of Tess, and he also struggled with the damage done to women and nature by patriarchy. He appears to have especially despised the destruction of nature for human entertainment rather than actual human needs. Hardy spoke out against those sports and pastimes resulting in injury or ruin for any part of the natural environment (especially those constituting animal cruelty), asserting that such activities were purely unnecessary, barbaric, and destructive.

Hardy pictures the overworked creatures and such other pathetic scenes of the rustic world which are changed forever from their real form and qualities for the welfare of the humans. It also shows his clear inclination toward ecofeminism. Each of these descriptions is a clear example of the destruction of the natural world by a male-dominated society. Hardy represents the manipulation of the female body which moves from pastoral integration to a mechanical world of disintegration and exploitation. He draws a parallel between animals and Tess. It shows his predicament in the wider context of patriarchal violence towards both the human and non-human. Hardy's sense of destruction of the rural phenomena and violation of female rights might be understood in terms of ecofeminism. There are several examples of eco-feminism in the novel and the ongoing process of the improvement of the human situation through the destruction of the natural inhabitant but one of the special notice and pathetic is the death of the family horse of the Durbeyfield's, 'Prince' an overworked beast of burden. He is killed in an accident with a speeding mail cart when Tess and her brother both mere children drowsily attempt to support their family financially by driving bee hives to market

before dawn. Tess' action is surely destructive to nature as she tries to alter the natural role and work of insects negatively to gratify the selfish purpose of humanity.

Another example of eco-feminism in the novel is the use of the word red tyrant to indicate the worst effect of machines in the rural area. Steam machines used for agricultural purposes begin to colonise rural society and seem to violate and displace the female body and nature. Whereas "Talbothays still offers a pastoral community, Flintcomb Ash is a cold place of abjection where both the land and the women are ruthlessly exploited" (Lanone). The picturisation of Tess' closeness to animals occurs when she:

"...is walking towards Flintcomb Ash. When farmer Groby drives by on the road and recognises her, she runs away 'like a haunted soul' (231) and lies down among the trees, gathering a heap of leaves to make a kind of 'nest' (231). She is disturbed by gurgling sounds during the night, and wakes up to find twitching pheasants lying nearby, 'their rich plumage dabbled with blood'" (232). (Lanone)

This paper concludes that Hardy throughout his novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* stresses the great chord between women and nature. The female anatomy is the true epitome of nature. Hardy believes in a life that is in true accordance with nature. It reflects that humans are closer to nature and enjoy her gifts as long as they possess natural qualities of compassion, innocence and purity but as they lose their natural qualities the ferocious elements of nature pose an evil canopy over them leading them to suffer, endure pain and finally meet their tragic ends. Thomas Hardy is a path-breaking novelist. He deviates completely from the accepted Victorian traditional values in depicting not only sexual violations but also the constant displacement or dislocation upsetting rural ecosystems and through the exposure of the exploitation of female bodies through a kind of work that is becoming more and more mechanised and inhuman. In Hardy's view historical changes in transitional society do not necessarily mean development and progress but the reverse of it they cast failure and regret. Especially for women who are in close association with nature. Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is certainly a great literary work from the perspective of eco-feminism by exposing the economic exploitation of nature and the oppression of women in the industrial age. Hardy makes a scathing critique of the irrational patriarchal society, calls for the protection of the environment and also advocates gender equality. The patriarchy could not be challenged without challenging ecological damages and each side of the problem must be addressed to address the other. From an ecofeminist view, women's suffering and oppression are connected to the destruction of nature and society. Tess is the victim of patriarchal society's codes and conducts while nature depicted in the novel is the victim of the Industrial Revolution. Hardy's eco-feminist view helps to understand the double standards of Victorian society towards women. Hardy expresses his sympathetic view for Tess in particular and women in Victorian society in general. At least but not last reading of Tess by Hardy from the perspective of eco-feminism is relevant both from a revisionist standpoint and for possible historical insight. Being a champion commentator on current social issues, Hardy has provoked the world's attention towards problems such as patriarchy, devastation and subjugation of women in contemporary Victorian society. His *Tess* certainly a masterpiece, is an urge to reevaluate the current mechanised civilization which rejects the

rights of women and judges them through the group lens of patriarchy making a comfortable path both for the manipulation of body and land.

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