

# Unconventional Hardy in the Light of His Two Female Characters 'Bathsheba Everdene and Eustacia Vye'

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## Abstract

The study tries to show how the characters of Thomas Hardy's novels are unconventional in terms of the contemporary society and the social life. Comparing to men, the women in the Victorian age were considered weaker both physically and intellectually. In this age women were assumed to have entirely unusual in natures than men, greatly owing to biological determinism of Darwin's theory. [1]. These differences also determined their separate and different functions in society. The allocated spheres made women subordinate to male authority in social life. Thomas Hardy resists these socially accepted depictions of the female with the radically independent and strong heroines in his novels. He has redefined the role of women in his novels focusing on their instinctive traits as natural as they fight against the conventional society to assert their rights not as a separate entity but as human beings. Women in Hardy's novel, with their amalgamation of qualities, going beyond the firmness of Madonna and whore, must have confused many readers captured in mixed feelings of admiration and alarm in his time. And here lies Hardy's unconventionality as he did not delineate the perfect woman in fiction as the Victorian society expected them to be. And this unconventionality has also termed him an early feminist by some modern critics. To show his unconventionality regarding female characters in his novels, the present writers have chosen two major female characters, 'Bathsheba Everdene and Eustacia Vye' from two novels of Thomas Hardy- 'Far from the Madding Crowd( 1874) and The Return of the Native (1878)', and have discussed their conspicuous traits that mark their differences from Victorian stereotypical notion of women.

**Keywords:** Conventional, Unconventional, Thomas Hardy, Bathsheba Everdene, Eustacia Vye

## 1. Introduction

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928 ) a novelist and poet of late Victorian period was considered a writer of the age of transition as his long literary career witnessed and encompassed the most important artistic and literary changes of the modern era[2]. And all these changes are apparent in most of his writings which mostly reveal a feeling that tends towards atheism and subjective morality rather than an unconditional Christianity. In his lifetime he has written fourteen novels where his own philosophical views are frequently revealed through many ways. There was no place in Hardy's philosophy in Victorian England and so to say his philosophy hinted the coming social and cultural uprising of modernism. But besides his most discussing topic of philosophy there is another topic in his novels that has come to the notice of Modern readers, which is his unconventional depiction of female characters in most of his novels. They are unconventional as their natures and acts do not conform to the stereotype gender ideology in the contemporary Victorian England.

## 2. Structure of society and social classes as well as women's position in Victorian Period

There were three classes, the upper class, the middle class and the working class in Victorian Period. The Dukes, Aristocrats, Nobles and some wealthy families working in courts were the members in this upper class. The people of this class did not work as they gathered much wealth for centuries to lead a colorful life. Education belonged to this class as they were privileged with the best tutors in the society. The Victorian age was also very well-off for the people of middle class. The people of this class also possessed huge business territories. At the very beginning of the Victorian Age, the population of this class was very limited to a few. Although the educational facilities were limited only to the upper Class, the Industrial revolution brought an immense change in the life of the people of the class. It opened the doors wide open to the people of middle class giving the opportunity of decent living. The third or the working class among the social hierarchy was the lowest. This class was far from the political progress of the country and was hostile to the other two classes. This class was classified as the skilled workers and the unskilled workers. Because of the industrial revolution some of the skilled worker got job and led an independent life but the condition of unskilled workers including women were so miserable. The children of the class were enforced to go to work for their living where education was beyond imagination. At that time, Industrial revolution attributed to the change in the status of women. According to the traditional family pattern, the women were supposed to look after the household chores and to take care of children while the men would earn money. There was a strong presence of male dominance in the society. Women were to obey what men told them to do. The revolution gave women an opportunity to work and to earn money changing the old beliefs. The working women not only shared the burden of earning money but also gave

them a sense of security. Their lives were no longer restricted to the house and children. The segregation of large families into nuclear ones also added to the change in the women's lives. Hardy observed the social changes, especially changes in women from the close quarters in Victorian period, which have been reflected in his novels. In this regard, Hardy has portrayed Bathsheba Everdene and Eustacia Vye going against the established characteristics of so called typical women of Victorian period as the heroines of his novels from lower class to show miserable condition of women and a way out through them, which has been termed as his unconventionality [3].

### **3. Rationality for choosing the characters**

The present writers have selected the characters namely 'Bathsheba Everdene and Eustacia Vye' as they are two major characters more precisely heroines of Hardy's novels 'Far from the Madding Crowd' and 'The Return of the Native' respectively. Though there are many significant female characters in Hardy's novels who celebrate their ingenuity in showing their differences from traditional heroines, the present writers have particularly chosen two heroines, Bathsheba Everdene and Eustacia Vye with their defiance against various social mores can be discerned very vividly. Thomas Hardy's 'Far from the Madding Crowd' is the fourth and his first major literary success. The novel is the first to be set in Hardy's fictional county of Wessex in rural south west England. Through the theme of love, honor and betrayal Hardy has delineated the character of Bathsheba Everdene, her life and relationships with other characters namely William Boldwood, Gabriel Oak, and soldier Sergeant Troy. Although written almost one hundred fifty years ago, Bathsheba remains as fierce a character ever because of her complexities that define her as extraordinary also. 'The Return of the Native' is Thomas Hardy's sixth published novel. With its deeply flawed heroine Eustacia Vye and its open acknowledgement of illicit sexual relationships, 'The Return of the Native' raised some eyebrows when it first appeared as a series in Victorian England. Hardy's choice of themes- sexual politics, thwarted desire and the conflicting demands of nature and society mostly circle around its unconventional heroine and her relationship with other characters is merely a sign of his unconventional way of writing. Similarly the way Eustacia Vye is portrayed and because of whom the plot of the novel evolves, it claims her own importance as an exceptional character of the novel.

### **4. Objective of the writings**

The study aims at presenting Thomas Hardy as an unconventional writer in the light of two major female characters 'Bathsheba Everdene & Eustacia Vye' in his two famous novels 'Far from the Madding Crowd & The Return of the Native' in connection with the Victorian England.

### **5. Conventionality and unconventionality in literature**

Conventionality is the very way in which something is done that the most people of a society expect and consider being polite or the right way to do it. In literary term conventionality is an accepted way of doing things. Literary convention is an element of form style, or content in standard use. So to say, conventional writers in literature means the writers must follow the norms of the society, accept the social values, appreciate the attitude of people of the society and all of these will be reflected in their writings [4]. On the contrary, the term unconventionality is opposite to conventionality which means the state or quality of being inconsistent with originality, customs, rules, habit, style, belief and format of something or someone in or within the society. The term unconventionality in literature means the writers of this genre do not follow traditional style in their writings. In this regard, Thomas Hardy has been shown as an unconventional writer as he drew unconventional Victorian women in his novels in two of his early novels 'Far from the Madding Crowd and The Return of the Native'.

### **6. Gender ideology and separate sphere in the 19th century**

Both of these heroines through their traits and activities defy the gender ideology of Victorian England. In Victorian England (1830-1901) society had a strict code of ethics, values and morals, all of which merged together, specially related to gender relationship and how people and families were expected to behave and this was also reserved towards social classes that basically defined life. In connection with the various codes of conduct in social perspective, Queen Victoria had a very strict morality which emphasized the value of sexual restraint, low tolerance of crime and a strict social code of conduct. Any eccentricity from these strict mores was intolerable from the contemporary social point of view and in most of the cases women had their shares of sufferings of injustice more than men as in all ways they were subordinate to male authority [5]. In the early Victorian England the prescriptions of gender marked men as hard-working bread winners and women as their dedicated helpmates. During the Victorian Period men and woman had also their 'separate spheres' where men were embodied as contender of economic and amoral realm whereas women were figured as either ornamental trophies or spiritual guards of men's immoral souls. Owing largely to Darwin's work in biological determinism, men and women were considered purely isolated in nature dictating them different spheres and separate

functions in society. Men were imagined to have role fit for the public world, woman to the private. These thoughts about woman fell them apart as polar opposite in the contemporary society. The biological distinctions that are reflected in the lives of the people of the society are: Women are weak, domestic, timid, passive, dependent, emotional, illogical, pure, non sensual, non ambitious etc. On the contrary, men are powerful, worldly, brave, active, independent, rational, logical, tainted, sensual, ambitious etc. Women who tried to express desires or traits confronting to these principles were deemed and ostracized to have 'unsexed' themselves [6].

### **7. Hardy's Unconventional Heroines**

The women in Victorian period were hardly ever opened to fresh active functions bearing creative possibilities of challenge. The tales of travel, of discovery, of exploration were men's stories. The spheres of women in Hardy's world are widen yet remained well within the area of possibility and plausibility. Going against the social code, the women, in Hardy's world, worked outside the home both in conventional and unconventional occupations. They travelled alone away from the neighborhood, got on upon enterprises starting relationships of their own choices. In other words, they had to struggle against all odds. They struggled in a world, as Hardy says, is not friendly to women. Hardy has redefined the role of women in his novels especially in *Far from the Madding crowd* and *The Return of the Native*, focusing on their nature and activities which might be eccentric from contemporary point of view. By emphasizing the physical aspect of femininity in his unorthodox representation of the sexual female, Hardy threatens the Victorian model of women. Not only sexuality but in terms of other above mentioned ideological traits of women in Victorian England, the two heroines Eustacia Vye and Bathsheba seem to defy most of them and in many respects surpass the abilities of men . Hardy begins where the majority of Victorian novelists left off, with real, flesh and blood women [7].

### **8. Traits of Bathsheba in Hardy's Novel**

Bathsheba Everdene, the heroine of the novel, is an intriguing character from the beginning of Thomas Hardy's novel, *Far From the Madding Crowd*. Bathsheba is inherently virtuous and is not in essence wicked. The characteristics, she possesses, is captivating in one hand and abhorrent in the other. These behavioral traits of her are many of the causes to be much more interesting, which adds a new dimension to an otherwise mundane plot. Bathsheba is a respectable character in this novel, mostly because of the way she is able to be so independent as a woman living in 19th-century England when independence would be considered only a man's right to cherish. We can see signs of this independence early when Bathsheba decides to ride her horse like a man, with one leg dangling over either side of the saddle [8]. To her aunt (and to most Victorians), this is a sexually scandalous thing to do. But Bathsheba confidently responds to any objections by saying that she can ride on the other saddle also. Bathsheba really shows what she's made of when she decides to fire her farm's manager and to run the place herself. For men working under her, this is an unthinkable thing to do. But again, Bathsheba is ready for the challenge, telling them, She goes on to do a very good job of running the farm, which makes pretty freaking ahead of her time, as in her time a woman's place is her domestic home and her only responsibility is to do her household activities. There is another trait of Bathsheba which is similar to Eustacia. That is her wild and impulsive nature and it is her second most prominent characteristic. Like her pride and vanity, this too also erodes with the passage of time. As Bathsheba grows older, she becomes more thoughtful of the consequences of her actions. Sexuality is evident in *Far from the Madding Crowd* when Bathsheba unknowingly admits her passion to Sergeant Troy. As she told him if he could only fight half as winning as he could talk, he was able to make a pleasure of a bayonet wound. Disclosing Bathsheba's sexuality, Hardy initiates to highlight the sexual quality of his female characters. To redefine female characters of his novels, Hardy has shown passionate characteristics of heroines which was previously found only in male characters [9],[10]. Besides being impulsive and passionate she is also bold and practical. Early in the novel when Gabriel is suffocating in his hut, she, instead of becoming unnerved, throws milk unto an unconscious Gabriel and loosens his handkerchief to allow him to breathe. A few Months later, Gabriel was so astonished to see her as the mistress of the large farm in Weathersbury at the rapidity with which the unpracticed girl of Norcombe had developed into the supervising and cool woman there. Her abrupt dismissal of her bailiff, Pennyways, her decision to manage the farm herself and many other instances further enunciate this exceptional characteristic of hers. This admirable characteristic is clearly depicted upon her husband Sergeant Troy's death. When all the female guests were jumbled horrified against the wall like sheep in the storm, all the male were perplexed about what to do, Bathsheba, on the other hand, remained indifferent and was sitting quite normally upon the floor with her husband's head in her lap. At that time she was trying to use a handkerchief to cover the wound and tried her level best to stop the blood to flow through the wound. When Gabriel arrived on the spot, she instantly ordered him to call a surgeon. A few hours later, when the surgeon arrived, he was surprised to see that everything had been arranged perfectly. Like Eustacia, Bathsheba does not give marriage the first priority in her life rather than her independence. For this reason this characteristic of her boosts the plot forward in many cases. For instance she tells Gabriel that she

would love having all the facts of a marriage but doesn't have desire to have a husband. And this is why although she respects Boldwood with high esteem, she doesn't want to marry him and keep delaying the decision to do so. Only because of Troy's immolating flattery, impulsiveness and her vanity which are only responsible to yield to marriage. Her only regard for her maiden cleanliness is linked with another desire of hers: her yearning to be independent [9],[10].

### 9. Traits of Eustacia Vye in Hardy's Novel

At the very introduction to Eustacia Vye, the heroine of 'The Return of The Native', her existence is revealed, it is through the idle gossip of the locals. She is portrayed as "very strange in her ways, living up there by herself, and such things please her," while a in the locality mentions that "she's a well-favored maid enough... especially when she's got one of her dandy gowns on." So, from the very opening of the text, the impression generated about Eustacia Vye is one of an pretty women but one who is overall weird and wonderful more precisely unconventional. In *The Return of the Native*, "Queen of Night" Eustacia Vye who is a native of the fashionable seaside resort of Budmouth and whose non-English father gives her an appearance that is slightly exotic, is ever an outsider on Egdon Heath. Like the heath, Eustacia is untamable, dark, and wild.[11] Her association with the heath illustrates her masculine qualities. Her whole personality has a sleepy, dreamy cast to it. The modern reader might think that Eustacia was either unaroused or as yet unsatisfied sexually. Certainly some of the descriptive details Hardy's use of words suggests this: for example, the way in which she takes pleasure from having her hair caressed, either when brushed or when she accidentally walks under a bush and it touches her hair. Her passions and instincts made her a model goddess, that is, those which make not quite a model woman. She takes perverse pleasure in being unconventional in small ways. Hardy uses several phrases to describe her reaction to life, among the most striking of which is her smoldering rebelliousness. Eustacia had got the vision of some marriage of inexpressible glory; yet, though her emotions were in full vigor, she cared for no meaner union. Thus we see her in a strange state of isolation. She was after Wildeve and Clym only to satisfy her burning passion or to achieve her optimistic goal of life. There is no doubt that she is a material girl, who wants culture and money and excitement in life. It often seems like love, to her, is merely a means to an end- a way to get to that exciting, wealthy life she desires. She basically wants to live out one of her romantic dream stories. Love is like a plotting device to her, more about adventure than about people. For these reasons Eustacia wants to escape the environment that keeps her from finding independence. And there is a definite boldness to Eustacia in all this- she knows what she wants and she is willing to do what it takes to get it. And these traits in her nature obviously disagree with pre accepted biological traits of women in Victorian England, that women are weak, timid, passive and domestic. Rather she is such an active character in the novel that other characters seem to be evolving around her keeping her at the centre of them. Through Eustacia Vye, Hardy has created an unconventional woman antagonized by the desires of passionate love and the independence of a male [9], [10].

### 10. Conclusion

The notion of gender ideology in the 19th century was enough to restrain the qualities of women that might be proved to be more enriching than men. It's the contribution of the popular writer like Thomas Hardy, who through his writings gave his heroines extra space where their very natures are examples in themselves to defy those ideological beliefs about women in the contemporary society. The way the two female characters have been depicted in novels, which cherish almost all the qualities of men, might be eccentric from the Victorian readers' point of view but undoubtedly show the way towards feminism from the modern readers' point of view. That's why Hardy's novels are still to be analyzed by modern critics.

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