



Tess, a novel of Naturalism

Dr. T.Eswar Rao, Asst. Prof. PG Department of English, Berhampur University,
Bhanja Bihar, Ganjam, Odisha-760007

Abstract: *Tess of the d'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented* is a novel by Thomas Hardy. It has been considered as a major nineteenth-century English novel. Many scholars and critics term it as Hardy's masterpiece. It was initially published by the British illustrated newspaper "The Graphic" in 1891 and later turned into book form in 1892. It received mixed reviews when it first appeared because it challenged the sexual morals of late Victorian England. As the name of the novel suggests, it is all about how Hardy has represented a pure and innocent woman, Tess. It depicts the picture of impoverished rural England. It is set in Thomas Hardy's fictional Wessex.

Keywords: Novel, Naturalism, and Cosmic irony

Narration

The word "novel" is derived from the Italian "novella" which stands for a little new thing in the form of a short tale. Currently it is a prose fiction of middle length, such as Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness". Over the years there evolved various forms of novels and the current novel under consideration is in true sense a novel of Naturalism.

Naturalism is claimed to portray an accurate depiction of life. It is not only a special selection of subject matter and a special way of organizing and rendering those materials but also a mode of fiction that is developed by a group of writers in accordance with a particular philosophical thesis, a product of post-Darwinian biology in the nineteenth century. As per this thesis, a human being exists entirely in the order of nature and doesn't have a soul or any access to a religious or spiritual world beyond the natural world. Therefore such a being is merely a higher order animal whose character and behavior are entirely determined by two types of forces: heredity and environment. Each person inherits compulsive instincts,

especially hunger, the drive to accumulate possessions, and sexuality. This animal is then subjected to the social and economic forces in the family, the class, and the environment in which he or she is born. In a novel of Naturalism, the novelist tries to present subjects with frankness about activities and bodily functions as the theme and characters are portrayed in Tess of the d'Urbervilles. Tess, the protagonist of this novel, is a very simple rural girl without any sophistication and urban artificiality and the antagonist, Alec d'Urbervilles, exhibits strong animal drives such as greed and sexual desire. The end of the naturalistic novel is usually tragic, but not, as in classical and Elizabethan tragedy, because of a heroic but losing struggle of the individual mind and will against gods, enemies, and circumstances. Instead the protagonists of the naturalistic plot, a pawn to multiple compulsions, usually disintegrate, or are wiped out.

In case of Tess, this is exactly the case; Tess loses the struggle of her mind as it fluctuates between the extremes of good and bad because of circumstances and



family conditions, and in the hands of the obvious and surreptitious enemy, Alec d'Urbervilles. In fact throughout the novel there is suffering, may it be the loss of virginity by Tess in the hands of Alec or the death of her infant Sorrow, or her separation from her husband Angel Clare. It is Tess who is always in pain. And whatever she is forced to act or behave, it is always natural to happen to an innocent rustic girl.

In this novel, Hardy subtly applies "Cosmic irony" or "the irony of fate" that can be attributed to literary works in which a deity, or else fate, is represented as though deliberately manipulating events so as to lead the protagonists to false hopes, only to frustrate and mock them. Here the heroine, Tess, loses her virtue because of her innocence, then loses happiness because of her honesty, finds it again only by murder and remains happy only briefly, is finally hanged. Fate mocks her again and again with the false hope of happiness first in her agreement to work at Alec's firm to improve her family's economic condition then in her marriage to Angel Clare to get separated from him after a moment.

A group of three factors responsible for the tragedy of Tess: the social reality, her own fate, and her innate personality flaw, each one described with its threadbare analysis.

For the first factor "social reality", it brings forth the social condition of England during the latter half of nineteenth century when the agriculturalist England was on its decline and its subsequent destruction in the hands of emerging capitalist England. It highlights how the pastoral dwellers in natural villages find themselves hard to survive in the modern world exist outside; how a simple and innocent girl

like Tess, with all her good and lovable nature gets wiped out in real world. Tess is just an embodiment of rural simplicity, rural personality without much sophistication. She persisted with her innate sincerity at every stage and the social condition of the cruel England couldn't tolerate this characteristic at any cost at it had already forgotten such values a long ago. At large, it depicts the harsh reality of the late Victorian England as a unique society where the good was being punished by the bad and it's always the society as a single entity that set the rules for survival in its lap.

About the second factor 'fate', it depicts how fate and chance in tandem ridicule the protagonists and treat them as pawns. Fate is represented as though deliberately manipulating events so as to lead the protagonists to false hopes, only to frustrate and mock them. Here the heroine, Tess, loses her virtue because of her innocence, then loses happiness because of her honesty, finds it again only by murder and remains happy only briefly, is finally hanged. Fate mocks her again and again with the false hope of happiness first in her agreement to work at Alec's firm to improve her family's economic condition then in her marriage to Angel Clare to get separated from him after a moment and finally seizes her eternal union with Angel Clare and obliterates her from the physical world through hanging.

The third factor "the innate flaw in Tess's character" underlines her innocence and persistence in her quest of the true meaning of life. It is fair to say that Tess herself is somewhat responsible for her catastrophic end. In a morally fragmented world, innocence has no place. And true meaning of life is nothing but money rather than happiness. Tess



always tries to see smile in the faces of her family members and it is here she falls a prey to a beast like Alec, who controls her with money power. The irony of the situation is that in this unprincipled world, it is always the kindest and noblest people who are apt to be hurt and taken advantage of by the others and are doomed to unluckiness upon misfortune. Timeless virtues may turn into disadvantages sometimes is portrayed here.

If I were given a chance, I would like to add an element or two to make the discussion more concrete. One such attribute would be the sexual desire of Alec or human race as a whole as per Darwinian biology, which considers human being is a higher order of animal and so bound to have animal instincts.

And the other constituent of this tragedy is the double-standard treatment of male and female virtuousness. When Angel reveals his past affairs with an older woman in London to Tess, she forgives him even though Angel is solely responsible for it. On the other hand, Tess's rape by Alec is not forgiven by Angel, for which she is hardly blamable.

Conclusion

Every aspect shown in the novel is a creation of environment owing much to Darwinian Theory. In addition, the omnipotent fate manipulates each event to move the plot further and treat the protagonist as a puppet in its hand. In a fitting manner Hardy concludes the novel: "The President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess."

References:

F.E. hardy: The Life of Thomas Hardy, Macmillan, London, 1962

Robert Gittings: Young Thomas Hardy, Heinemann, London, 1975 and, Older Hardy, Heinemann, London, 1978

A.P. Elliott: Fatalism in the works of Thomas Hardy, 1935-1966