



FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE IN THOMAS HARDY'S *TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES*: A CRITIQUE STUDY

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Abstract

*One of the most in-depth examinations of female suffering, sexual discrimination, and patriarchal tyranny in English literature is found in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891). The terrible experiences of Tess Durbeyfield are examined in this research paper as a feminist criticism of Hardy's book, highlighting the moral hypocrisy and oppression that women in Victorian society endured. By placing the book in the sociocultural framework of nineteenth-century England, the study explores how Hardy portrayed Tess as a victim of both structural patriarchy and personal exploitation. Based on feminist theorists like Kate Millett, Elaine Showalter, and Simone de Beauvoir, this research assesses Hardy's position on gender politics and asks if he qualifies as a feminist or just a sympathetic spectator of women's suffering. via a thorough textual study, the dissertation shows how Tess's defiance of these expectations represents early feminist consciousness and how Hardy exposes the harshness of societal standards that define female virtue via chastity and obedience. In the end, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is a lament for the demise of a lady whose sole "crime" is her innocence and inherent purity, as well as a critique of Victorian morality.*

Keywords

Patriarchy, Gender, Sexuality, Morality, Oppression, And Feminism, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

In English literature, Thomas Hardy (1840–1928) has a special place as a critique of Victorian social systems and a historian of country life. His books frequently focus on the ethical tensions that exist between society's strict rules of behaviour and our innate human desires. Of these, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is particularly noteworthy for her moving portrayal of the inequities that women endure in a society dominated by patriarchal power and moral hypocrisy. With its audacious depiction of female sexuality, victimisation, and societal censure, the 1891 book questioned the moral sensitivities of the day. Victorian ideas of purity, which associated female virtue with virginity rather than moral integrity or character, were directly challenged by the subtitle, *A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented*.

This research takes a feminist stance while examining *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, contending that Hardy's book foreshadows many issues of feminist thought in the 20th century. Tess's sorrow stems from a profoundly ingrained patriarchal system that diminishes women's autonomy and defines them according to male perspective, rather than just personal hardship. The interlocking forces of class, gender, and morality ensnare working-class lady Tess, ultimately resulting in her demise. Through Tess's tale, Hardy challenges the societal structures—marriage, the church, and



the family—that uphold male supremacy and highlights the damaging effects of sexual double standards.

Although Hardy was not politically a feminist; his depiction of Tess as both a victim and morally superior to her male peers is consistent with feminist reassessments of women's roles in literature. Tess is a symbol of both resistance and sorrow; her tragedy illustrates how women's voices are often silenced in a patriarchal society. Thus, this essay explores how the work functions as a critique of Victorian social and sexual morality and how Hardy's empathetic depiction of Tess foreshadows feminist criticisms of gender injustice.

Review of Literature:

For a long time, scholars have been debating Hardy's connection to feminism. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century's, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* was largely seen as a naturalistic or moralistic tragedy by its early reviewers. But when feminist literary critique gained traction in the 1970s, Tess started to be seen as a representation of female resistance and victimisation.

In *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), Elaine Showalter claims that although Hardy's female protagonists frequently live in “a tragic framework of male dominance,” their moral fortitude challenges patriarchal power. Tess is “a martyr of male desire and social hypocrisy,” according to Showalter. In a similar vein, Rosemarie Morgan highlights in *Women and Sexuality in the Novels of Thomas Hardy* (1988) that Hardy's female characters are not helpless victims but rather unique people with sexual and emotional vigour that defy Victorian expectations. Hardy “conferred moral superiority upon his heroines” and denounced the establishments that ruined them, according to Morgan.

According to Penny Boumelha's 1982 book *Thomas Hardy and Women: Sexual Ideology and Narrative Form*, Hardy's books both participate in and reveal the inconsistencies of Victorian gender ideology. According to her, Hardy's narrators occasionally betray his female characters by taking on a voyeuristic or moralising tone, which reflects the author's conflicted feelings on women's sexuality. However, Boumelha acknowledges that Hardy's compassion for women's plight represents a positive trend in Victorian literature.

In her 1928 article *The Novels of Thomas Hardy*, Virginia Woolf praised Hardy's skill at expressing “the tragedy of the unvoiced” and “the forces which oppress women with invisible weight.” Woolf thought that the struggle between nature and civilisation, freedom and tradition, was embodied by Hardy's tragic heroines, such as Tess and Sue Bridehead.

Furthermore, *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir (1949) offers a conceptual foundation for comprehending Tess's position. Tess's life as characterised by male gaze—first Alec's predatory hunger, then Angel's idealised worship—is illuminated by Beauvoir's theory that women are “the Other” in a society that is dominated by men. Similarly, Hardy's portrayal of Tess's victimisation and moral judgement may be analysed through Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970), which is pertinent for its examination of patriarchal domination through sexuality.

Tess of the d'Urbervilles unquestionably reveals the gendered violence ingrained in Victorian civilisation, according to recent critics like Pamela Dalziel and Kristin Brady, who have continued to re-examine Hardy's feminist aspects.

As a result, the consensus among historians is that Hardy is a bridge between Victorian realism and contemporary feminist awareness because Tess's tale goes beyond personal sorrow to represent a worldwide critique of women's oppression.

Feminist Theory Framework:



The feminist viewpoint used in this research is based on the writings of Kate Millett, Elaine Showalter, and Simone de Beauvoir. In addition to challenging the cultural and intellectual structures that uphold gender inequality, feminist critique critically examines how women are portrayed in literature. It looks for the ways that texts, stories, and characterisations are influenced by patriarchal ideals.

The "woman as Other" idea of Simone de Beauvoir puts Tess's oppression in perspective. According to Beauvoir's argument in *The Second Sex*, women are defined by their relationship to male subjects rather than by their inherent qualities, making them the reverse of men and their subordinates. Alec and Angel's perspectives shape Tess's identity; she is both idealised as a spiritual person and objectified as a sexual possession. Therefore, under masculine perceptions, her humanity is obliterated.

In *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett argues that control over female sexuality is a means of preserving patriarchal dominance. This dominance is demonstrated by Alec's "seduction" (or rape) of Tess, and the internalised double standard that supports male privilege is exposed by Angel's rejection of Tess after discovering her background. The systematic aspect of Tess's oppression is revealed by Millett's framework; it is not only a case of personal tragedy but rather a political reality of gender hierarchy.

The gynocritical approach of Elaine Showalter emphasises the voice and experience of women. Tess's hushed narrative—her incapacity to express her trauma—becomes representative of women's marginalisation in discourse within the framework of Hardy's book. Tess's battle to uphold moral principles in a society that rejects her autonomy is what gives the book its heartbreaking strength.

This essay addresses *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* as a feminist work that simultaneously challenges and reflects the patriarchal systems of its day by combining two academic stances.

Tess of the d'Urbervilles:

The story of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is one of innocence shattered by sexual and societal hypocrisy. In order to establish kinship with the affluent d'Urbervilles, Tess Durbeyfield, a poor country girl, is sent by her family. She meets Alec d'Urberville there, and after his predatory approaches, she is sexually violated, a moment that Hardy ambiguously depicts as both rape and seduction. Because it exposes the Victorian unease with female sexuality and consent, this uncertainty has been the focus of much feminist discussion.

Tess is sympathetically portrayed in Hardy's story as a victim of uncontrollable circumstances rather than a "fallen woman." He refers to her as "a pure woman faithfully presented" and maintains that she is morally pure. For its period, this demand was radical since it went against the moral norm that associated virtue with virginity. Tess is pure because she is good-hearted, honest, and resilient on the inside rather than because she is sexually innocent.

The societal structures that penalise women for male transgressions are criticised in the book. Tess experiences poverty, social exclusion, and moral censure following the loss of her child. Institutional brutality is symbolised by the church's refusal to baptise her illegitimate kid. Here, Hardy adopts an explicitly critical tone, arguing that societal and religious structures uphold injustice rather than kindness.

The absurdity of masculine idealism is further exposed by Tess's connection with Angel Clare, who at first glance appears to be her intellectual and moral equal. While having admitted to his own extramarital affair, Angel rejects Tess after discovering her sexual history, while idealising her as a representation of pastoral purity. The moral unfairness of Victorian patriarchy is best summed up by this double standard. The damaging tendency of masculine idealisation is revealed by Angel's failure to reconcile Tess's humanity with his ideal.



Hardy's storytelling style veers between fatalism and pity. In his portrayal of Tess, a woman fights against "the President of the Immortals," a term that represents fate's or society's disregard for human misery. It is possible to see Tess's eventual death for Alec's murder as society's last penalty for a woman who defies authority rather than as moral vengeance. Her murderous deed is a terrible protest against tyranny as well as a statement of agency.

Victorian Patriarchy and Gender Roles:

Strict gender hierarchies characterised Victorian England, where a woman's value was based on her obedience, virginity, and domestic virtue. Through its depiction of Tess as both morally upright and condemned, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* undermines these principles. Hardy reveals how the normal human experience is turned into a moral violation by patriarchal ideology.

Morally authoritative persons and organisations are responsible for Tess's demise. Male sexual power, or the capacity to have and dump women without repercussions, is personified by Alec d'Urberville. Despite being academically educated, Angel Clare internalises patriarchal morals and helps bring Tess to ruin. The male-dominated system that determines and assesses female virtue is represented by both men in various ways.

Hardy criticises not just people but also the societal structure that upholds these norms. The court system's execution of Tess, the community's rumours, and the church's rejection of her confession all serve as examples of systemic sexism. The fact that society punishes Tess for her few acts of autonomy—her escape from home, her confession to Angel, and her eventual murder of Alec—confirms that female agency is unacceptable under patriarchal standards. Hardy's narrative tone and visuals clearly reflect his feminist sympathies.

In contrast to human harshness, he portrays nature as Tess's only haven—a mother, nonjudgmental presence. Tess's association with natural morality rather than manufactured social norms is highlighted by the pastoral imagery that surrounds her. In addition to idealising Tess's innocence by equating her with nature, Hardy criticises the culture that undermines natural innocence.

However, Hardy's feminism is constrained by his historical setting. Tess's voice is still mostly mediated through the narrator, and her death serves as a reminder that female suffering within patriarchal frameworks is inevitable. However, Hardy humanises the "fallen woman" and challenges readers to consider the fairness of her situation by giving her moral dignity and emotional depth. As a proto-feminist work that opened the door for further investigations of female subjectivity, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is both a product of and a challenge to its period.

Conclusion:

One of the first and most powerful feminist criticisms in English fiction is found in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Thomas Hardy reveals Victorian England's sexual, moral, and societal hypocrisies via Tess Durbeyfield's sad existence. Tess's abuse is not only personal; it is systematic, stemming from patriarchal structures that penalise women for the wrongdoings of men and associate female value with virginity. Hardy foreshadows the feminist reevaluation of women's experience by insisting on Tess's moral purity, which goes against the accepted morality of his time.

Hardy's depiction of Tess's pain and dignity amounts to an implied call for gender justice, even though his viewpoint is nonetheless limited by the fatalism of his worldview. As a "pure woman" who is ruined by society's incapacity to acknowledge her humanity rather than by sin, Tess becomes a symbol of defiance against repressive moral rules.

Hardy's work speaks to continuing feminist issues about autonomy, sexuality, and moral double standards by shedding light on the paradoxes of Victorian gender theory. As a result, Tess



of the d'Urbervilles continues to be both a tragic story and a powerful indictment of patriarchy, demonstrating Hardy's moral fortitude and compassion for women marginalised by society.

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Article Received:23/09/2025

Article Accepted:29/09/2025

Published Online:30/09/2025

To Cite the Article: *Malshette, Yogesh*. "Feminist Perspective in Thomas Hardy's *Tess Of The D'urbervilles*: A Critique Study." *Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed/Peer Reviewed e-Journal of English Language, Literature and Criticism*, Vol.-VI, Issue-2, September, 2025, 208-212. www.literarycognizance.com