

The Tragic Sense of Passivity, Docility and Marriage Conventionality in Hardy's *The Woodlanders*

Noorbakhsh Hooti (Corresponding author)

Assistant Professor

English Department, Faculty of Arts, Razi University, Kermanshah, Iran

Tel: 98-912-593-5460 E-mail: nhooti@yahoo.com

Masoud Ahmadi Mousaabad

Assistant Professor

English Department, Faculty of Arts, Gonbad Institute of Higher Education, Gonbad Kavoos, Iran

Tel: 98-911-376-1217 E-mail: ahmadimousa@yahoo.com

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Abstract

Hardy was consistently interested in women despite the enormous pressures of the Victorian society of his time. His great compassion towards them and issues related to their lives are reflected in all his works. This is an area in which considerable work has been done but it still offers immense scope for further study. Through a close critical analysis this study tries to bring to light the tragic sense of passivity, docility and biased marriage laws, which have entrapped his female characters in the selected novel. It tries to give a vivid picture to the sufferings and injustice meted out to them in a society that frustrated individual abilities and crushed their natural and human impulses. It further tries to show the helpless female characters whose identity and the nature of existence is decided by the male characters who believe that "Might is Right." Finally the study tries to conclude that the only way for the women to save themselves from the shackles of the arrogant colony of men is to start believing in themselves and breaking the fetters of slavery and establishing their own identity.

Keywords: Woodlanders, Docility, Passivity, Marriage conventionality

Introduction

The study starts with a brief introduction of Hardy and his world, and then it gives a close analysis of *The Woodlanders* (1887) based on the tragic sense of passivity, docility and marriage conventionality.

Hardy established himself as a distinguished novelist of the nineteenth century. Through his works of fiction, he involved himself in projecting his image of men and women in a particular social context which he portrayed. He found the women shackled and wrapped in black shrouds of so-called marriage tie, which was nothing more than a brutal colony. The women found themselves colonized under the insatiable selfish male wants and desires. This study tries to give Hardy's world a colonial picture and give a glowing analysis to its suppressed female characters who are the helpless victims of their licentious male partners. The study makes an attempt to excavate and retrieve the intersections of gender, race, culture and class in human rights discourse, not to excuse human rights abuses in the postcolonial world, but instead to ground them in their historical complexity.

In this study Hardy's highly critical treatment of women in the Victorian society is tangibly observed. His sympathies go out to the women in the Victorian age and the unequal treatment given to them due to the unjust marriage laws. He works tirelessly in order to change the male-dominated society and to bring about the desired changes for the mutual benefit of women as well as men. Hardy was far more modern than his era as his writing conveys that race, gender and culture must not be the pretexts to give birth to discrimination, and he strongly opposed any kinds of superiority and inferiority labels based on the physical power. As Lange, Fincham, Hawthorn and Lothe state (2008, p. 4) "*Even though, overall, Hardy is a nineteenth-century novelist on the threshold of modernism, significant aspects of his narrative are more modernist than they appear to be at first sight.*"

The Victorian society of the nineteenth century was a rigid and uncompromising one towards women. The laws governing the social and marital affairs were all male-oriented and deeply entrenched in their implementation and adherence. It was in this atmosphere that Hardy took up the onus on himself, of projecting the various issues with a hope of finding a solution. Hardy pointed out the ills of the contemporary society and presented the ways of solving them. Thus, feminism originated from the need for women to have a choice about the kind of life they wished to lead. Feminists demand that women should be treated as autonomous individuals and not as passive objects of men's fancy; that women should not be considered inferior to men; that equal attention and

opportunities should be given to women for education and employment for their economic independence. In the Victorian society; man was placed as superior to woman and he refused to accept woman as a companion on equal terms. Thus, the need for the emancipation of women arose. Mary Wollstonecraft, J.S. Mill, Simone De Beauvoir and Andrea Dworkin championed the feminist movement for liberation of women.

Hardy was successful in projecting women's helpless situation by defying the well-entrenched social customs. His role is one of a pioneer showing the new emerging women the way to their emancipation from the strictly conventional, uncaring and unsympathetic society. In his novels, we come across women who are passive and vain as well as women who are ambitious and independent and do not conform to the rigid moral codes and social systems.

Since love has by no means the same meaning for both the sexes, Hardy points out that it becomes the cause for serious misunderstandings that separate them. For a woman, love is not only devotion but a total surrendering of body and soul without any reservation. Enclosed in her own sphere, under male domination, love becomes one of the means to assert her worth. Hence, we find that women are enchanted by man's virility, wealth, distinction of manners and social status.

The gap between international human rights norms and the principles espoused by transnational movements and actual human rights conditions suggests the need for an alternative reading of the human rights discourse. This study addresses how and why a close critical analysis enables us to better grapple with the silences and erasures of Hardy's characters that accompany the dominant liberal discourse on human rights, offers a different vantage point for exploring the human rights discourse and the location and power of key contributors to this discourse, and furthers our understanding of the socio-political possibilities and limits of a human rights critique.

A deep journey within the worlds of the inhabitants of *The Woodlanders* shall make us touch the tragic sense of docility of the helpless female characters whose identity and destiny unfortunately seem to be determined by the male characters, which Hardy finds inhumane.

Argument

The Woodlanders

The Woodlanders (1887) is an account of Little Hintock, the woodland lying in the South of England, its inhabitants, their occupations and their lives on which money, ambition, and intense passion make a powerful impact. It also records how a small village community slowly accepts the changes which modernization introduces in its wake. It is in *The Woodlanders* that Hardy's treatment of the question of marriage becomes more explicit and clear. He tackles the relationship between men and women within and outside the wedlock. In his preface to *The Woodlanders*, Hardy writes:

From the point of view of marriage as a distinct covenant or undertaking, decided on by two people fully cognizant of all its possible issues, and competent to carry them through, this assumption is, of course, logical. Yet no thinking person supposes that on the broader ground of how to afford the greatest happiness to the units of human society during their brief transit through this sorry world. (1994, p. 5-henceforth Hardy)

The heroine of *The Woodlanders*, Grace Melbury, is the most unfortunate victim of male abuse and social as well as legal injustice, which she is forced to put up with throughout her life. She is the only daughter of George Melbury who is a rich timber merchant of Little Hintock. She has lived in the city and seen the false glamour of city life. She feels that real happiness lies not in the cultured life but in the simple ways of the woodland people. But within her, there is a conflict between her modern nerves and primitive feelings. She wavers between the two attractions and is unable to decide in favour of her love for the old fashionable ways. According to Bhabha (quoted in Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2003, p. 207):

The enunciation of cultural difference problematizes the division of past and present, tradition and modernity, at the level of cultural representation and its authoritative address. It is the problem of how, in signifying the present, something comes to be repeated, relocated, and translated in the name of tradition, in the guise of a pastness that is not necessarily a faithful sign of historical memory but a strategy of representing authority in terms of the artifice of the archaic. That iteration negates our sense of the origins of the struggle. It undermines our sense of the homogenizing effects of cultural symbols and icons, by questioning our sense of the authority of cultural synthesis in general.

The cause of Grace's tragedy lies to a great extent in the foolish ambition of her father, George Melbury. He has spent lots of money on Grace's education so that she may not be one of the Woodlanders. He is preoccupied with high social manners and culture since he educates Grace to be above the people in Little Hintock. The victimization of Grace begins at this point of her life, at the hands of her own father who alienates her from her family and social background by sending her to a fashionable and reputed boarding school. When Grace returns home after completing her education, Mr. Melbury takes charge of the young girl's life and affairs. Though Grace wants to marry Giles Winterborne, a sturdy young man of Little Hintock, Mr. Melbury advises her against it. He

is seen here breaking his own virtuous vow to marry Grace to Giles. This was decided in order to settle a serious mistake that he had done to Giles's father by taking away Grace's mother from him in a tricky manner as he wanted to marry her himself. Feeling very guilty and miserable, Mr. Melbury had determined to atone for his sin by marrying Grace to Giles. But when the occasion to fulfill his vow comes, he feels that Grace is too good for the likes of the uneducated, poor Giles. This is made clear in his talk to his second wife. *"But since I have educated her so well, and so long, and far above the level of the daughters hereabout, it is wasting her to give her a man of no higher standing than he."* (Hardy, p. 17) Lewis remarks: *"Most late Victorian middle class women did not receive a good enough education to converse with their husbands as equals. They were usually educated at home, perhaps spending a few years in a private school."* (1984, p. 125)

Mr. Melbury always brags of the education of Grace in order to lift her up to a superior level which cannot be matched by the people of Little Hintock. But the 'fancy education', which Melbury provides for Grace, cuts her off from her former plain way of life and from her old love, Giles Winterborne. Her education is regarded by her father as an investment which will pay well in the form of a gentleman as son-in-law. In other words, Mr. Melbury thinks of his daughter as a piece of human coinage which he can use to buy higher social status. At the same time, he refuses to acknowledge that she is a woman who can decide for herself and has individuality of her own. Mr. Melbury expresses his desire to achieve a higher social status, *"to sow in her heart cravings for social position was obviously his strong desire."* (Hardy, p. 104)

Here, we see Mr. Melbury ruining his daughter's happiness by imposing his will on Grace, leaving no freedom to take her own decision in shaping her life. Moreover, he makes Grace promise him to break off completely with Giles Winterborne, which she does with a sigh, just to please her father: *"Promise me that you will not meet him again without my knowledge."* (p. 105) *"I never do meet him, father, either without your knowledge or with it."* (ibid)

Mill comments: *"the father had the power to dispose of his daughter in marriage at his own will and pleasure, without any regard to hers, and it was practically impossible for the girl to refuse compliance if the father persevered."* (1995, p. 37)

Grace's response here is mixed with a sense of resignation and sympathy for Giles Winterborne. The father-daughter relationship too is also a subject of Hardy's severe criticism and condemnation. Hardy expresses it through Grace's words as to how she wished not to be her father's worldly hope. But that is not the sole cause of the tragedy. She is weak enough to be lured by social status as she does not have a clear understanding of her inner desires and of what is really good for her. In her heart, she knows the worth of Giles but is unable to decide for herself. Wollstonecraft explains:

Men in their youth are prepared for professions and marriage is not considered as the grand feature in their lives, whilst women, on the contrary, have no other scheme to sharpen their faculties. To rise in the world and have the liberty of running from pleasure to pleasure, they must marry advantageously, and to this object their time is sacrificed. (1995, p. 68)

At this point, we see Grace being attracted by the new arrival of Dr. Fitzpiers, a young and handsome man, at Little Hintock. Grace starts thinking seriously about him. She is only looking for the social and intellectual refinement in him which she will be able to share. Mr. Melbury encourages Dr. Fitzpiers' approach to Grace and appreciates Grace's acceptance of the same. He is overwhelmed at the material prospects of this alliance when the doctor within a short period of courtship proposes to Grace:

"I always said," continued he with a lump in his throat, "that my Grace would make a mark at her own level some day. That was why I educated her. I said to myself, I'll do it, cost what it may, though her stepmother was pretty frightened at my paying out so much money year after year. I knew it would tell in the end."

"Where you've not good material to work on, such doings would be waste and vanity," I said. "But where you have that material, it is sure to be worthwhile." (Hardy, p. 185)

"Cost," "paying out so much money," "waste" and "being worthwhile" are the terms of Mr. Melbury's interest. The irony of it all is that "waste" is exactly what comes about in the end, not a material waste but a human loss, the waste of his daughter's whole life through his foolish pursuits.

Fitzpiers is portrayed as alienated from the Hintock community and an understandable character living among them. Fitzpiers's dislike for old-fashioned Woodland forms of life begins to manifest itself soon. He feels that he belongs to a different species from the people who are working in Little Hintock. He is in fact a man who can love more than one woman at once. Hardy remarks:

He had noticed himself to be possessed by five distinct infatuations at the same time. If this were true, his differed from the highest affection as the lower orders of the animal world differ from advanced organisms, partition causing not death but a multiplied existence. (p. 252)

His encounters with young Suke Damson which comes to the notice of Grace is brushed aside with a simple lie but his serious entanglement with Mrs. Felice Charmond, a wealthy and middle-aged widow, disturbs his

married life to a great extent: Dr. Fitzpiers's desire to possess Grace is based mainly on her physical and financial assets. Hardy explains:

Apart from his lover-like anxiety to possess her the few golden hundreds of the timber-dealer, ready to hand, formed a warm background to Grace's lovely face and went some way to remove his uneasiness at the prospect of endangering his professional and social chances by an alliance with the family of a simple countryman. (pp. 204-5)

Hardy's other emotional heroine is Felice Charmond. She is a more daring version of Eustacia Vye as Hardy is much more explicit about Felice's sexuality and desires than he ever was about Eustacia Vye. Felice Charmond is the widow of a very wealthy gentleman who was thirty years older to her. On his death, she becomes a rich landlady of certain dwellings at Hintock where her will is the law. Felice finds a diversion for her bored life at Little Hintock in Dr. Fitzpiers. Her irresistible attraction for the young and handsome doctor has serious implications on Grace Melbury's marriage. Felice's whole life depends on the emotional excitement she enjoys from her various romantic attachments as she believes: *"women are always carried about like corks upon the waves of masculine desires."* (p. 228) Wollstonecraft explains: *"Women have seldom sufficient serious employment to silence their feelings, a round of little cares, as vain pursuits frittering away all strength of mind and organs, they become naturally only objects of sense."* (1995, p. 85)

Yet, she makes no effort to break away from her emotional parasitism in her attachments. Hardy does not approve this aspect of her conduct. He describes her as a melodramatic temptress. She disturbs the orderly community life at Little Hintock by her role as an arrogant landlady. She evicts tenants without any mercy as soon as their leases expire and pulls down their old dwellings in order to build new ones. Yet, we notice Hardy sympathizing with her as she is also a victim of intense passion and male-exploitation.

Though Felice Charmond is the seducer in her affair with Dr. Fitzpiers, at a later stage, he takes control of her feelings which she is unable to break. Even after becoming his mistress, she seems to suffer very much due to the accusations and pleadings of Mr. Melbury and Grace. Hardy is particularly insistent on this point when Grace confronts Felice Charmond. After some heated exchange of arguments, Felice whispers something in Grace's ear and instantly bursts into a violent fit of sobbing. Grace is thunder-struck at this revelation and she exclaims, *"He's had you! Can it be--can it be!"* (Hardy, p. 293) Subbamma indicates:

In case of debauchery, the woman is abused. She is described as a fallen woman. The man goes scot free. What is pleaded here is that there should be only one set of moral principles for both men and women. (1985, p. 6)

In spite of this initial shock and distress Grace has, the two women still have an alliance based on their knowledge that they both have been victims of male selfishness, deceit and abuse. Their mutual sympathy is shown in their kissing each other unconsciously and that is more important than Felice's confession. Hardy shows Fitzpiers's adulterous relationship with Felice, while marrying Grace, as male offence against two women. Thus, the alliance between Grace and Felice Charmond is a real challenge to man's mistreatment of women. Subbamma says:

Women are slaves to male domination. They are slaves to ignorance. Not only that they do not enjoy equality with men in social, economic, political and cultural sectors of life. They do not have freedom. They are slaves to their husbands and their families. Women have no individuality. They are not allowed to aspire for individual freedom. (p. 4)

On another occasion, Suke Damson and Felice Charmond visit Dr. Fitzpiers when he is injured. Grace demonstrates helpless passivity: *"You shall know all I know. Indeed, you have a perfect right to go into his bedroom; who can have better than either of you? . . . Wives all, let's enter together."* (Hardy, p. 313) Here Grace's hidden jealousy and deep emotional disturbance can be seen in her open challenge to them. But she does not indulge in strong expression of her inner turbulence through protests of any kind. Her passivity and meekness are also the targets of Hardy's resentment and criticism since another woman would have fought for her husband. Yet Hardy portrays the pain inflicted on these women as they sit at Fitzpiers's bedside, anxious of his critical state. Hardy says, *"In their gestures and faces there were anxieties, affection, and agony of heart-all for a man who had wronged them-had never really behaved towards either of them anyhow but selfishly."* (p. 313)

Hardy also reveals the sudden compassionate insight that overwhelms Grace as she contemplates the relationships these women have with her husband and sees it as similar to her own, without any conventionality. It is the rigid conventionality of marriage that Hardy explores in his preface to *The Woodlanders*.

In this regard Schneur quotes Susan B. Anthony saying in 1853,

I do not know whether the world is quite willing or ready to discuss the question of marriage. . . . I feel as never before, that this whole question of woman's rights turns on the pivot of the marriage relation, and, mark my word, sooner or later, it will be the topic for discussion. (1996, p. 23)

Mr. Melbury sees a glimmer of hope in the new divorce law. He makes all efforts to get Grace a divorce from her bondage with Fitzpiers and probably a new alliance with the faithful and devoted Giles Winterborne. Grace too, nourishes a chance coming her way to bury her unpleasant past with all the sufferings and pain she had endured.

Mr. Melbury invites Giles Winterborne once again with the prospect of marrying Grace and decides to fight his daughter's battle. He says to Giles:

She told me only this day that she hates refinements and such like. All that my trouble and money bought for in that way is thrown away upon her quite. She'd fain be like Marty South—think o' that! the top of her ambition! perhaps she's right. Giles, she loved you under the rind: what's more she loves 'ee still—worse luck for the poor maid! (Hardy, p. 273)

Mr. Melbury keeps on blaming himself for Grace's unhappiness. He has to bear the humiliation of begging for his daughter's happiness from Mrs. Charmond and has to hear the humiliating words of Dr. Fitzpiers.

Fitzpiers's elopement with Felice to Europe is stated as ground for divorce. But a mere statement from Mr. Melbury is found not sufficient to grant Grace an annulment of her marriage and the petition is rejected. The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1887 enabled man to divorce his wife for adultery but the woman had to prove that adultery had been aggravated by other things like physical abuse and desertion. In other words, a decent woman was totally damned if she had a lover but man could do anything he liked. Hence, hope of legal freedom is dashed, as divorce laws are male-oriented. Melbury in a dejected mood informs Grace: *"You are now as ever Fitzpiers's wife. I was deluded. He has not done you enough harm! You are still subject to his beck and call."* (p. 354)

According to Mill, Jeremy Bentham was concerned with the marital and sexual rights of women. He argued for:

"the right of women to obtain divorce in case of an unhappy marriage. He dismissed the idea of an irrevocable marriage contract as 'absurd and cruel.' He writes 'to live under the constant authority of a man that one detests, is already a species of slavery,' to be constrained to receive his embraces, is a misery too great to be tolerated even in slavery itself." (1995, p. 22)

It is not merely that the law fails to afford simple remedies; it does not coincide with mature moral sense. Long before they hear of the appearance of the new divorce law, experience made Grace and her father reassess their earlier moral assumptions. When Grace hears the truth about Suke Damson's relationship with Fitzpiers, she was almost startled to find how little she suffered from that jealous excitement which is conventionally attributed to all wives in such circumstances. But though possessed by none of the feline wildness which it was her moral duty to experience she did not fail to suspect that she had made a frightful mistake in her marriage. Acquiescence in her father's wishes had been degradation to herself.

Even the worthless Mr. Melbury begins to question his previous conformity:

He knew that a woman once given to a man for life took, as a rule, her lot as it came, and made the best of it without external interference; but for the first time he asked himself why this so generally should be done. (Hardy, p. 260)

In her preface to 1842 edition of *Indiana*, Sand wrote, *"The laws which still govern a woman's existence in wedlock in the family, and in society are unjust and barbarous."* (1996, p. 26) In regard to divorce laws, Vogel says,

The husband can demand a divorce on the ground of his wife's adultery. The wife can demand a divorce, on the ground of the husband's adultery if he has lived with his concubine under the roof of the matrimonial home. (1992, pp. 180-81)

So when the new law appears, it seems to Grace a convenient way of regularizing a situation which her developing moral awareness has already approved. Shortly, she is allowed to believe that the law endorses her independent judgment.

When Mr. Melbury tells her the truth of the law, Grace has already gone far in moral emancipation to accept interpretation of the divorce laws of her status. Hence, she sets off to seek Giles's help in running away. Her progression towards liberty of the conventions has to be slowed down as she kept Giles in the rain long enough to cause his death. She explains her behaviour to Giles:

You know what I feel for you—what I have felt for no other living man, what I shall never feel for a man again. But as I have vowed myself to somebody else than you, and cannot be released, I must behave as I do behave, and keep that vow. I am not bound to him by any divine law, after what he has done; but I have promised, and I will pay. (Hardy, p. 370)

Later, she relents and asks Giles to come inside. *"Come to me, dearest! I don't mind what they say or what they think of us anymore."* (p. 374)

Giles refuses to have shelter inside and dies subsequently. Ironically, when Grace reaches her highest point of rebellion against conventional morality, she brings herself at last to conformity. Therefore, Grace in a defeated state of mind, returns to seemingly repentant Dr. Fitzpiers to start a new life with him, away from Little Hintock.

Mr Melbury too accepts his defeat in this sorrowful drama of his daughter's life. He becomes speechless, having nothing to say except: *"But I am hurt; I am scourged; I am astonished! In the face of this there is nothing to be said."* (p. 291)

De Beauvoir remarks: *"The restrictions that education and custom impose on women now limit her grasp on the universe; when the struggle to find one's place in this world is too arduous, there can be no question of getting away from it."* (1988, p. 720)

Grace has no choice but to live with a man who, no matter how temporarily repentant is, likely to return to his old habits. Unhappy endings are hinted rather than stated. Mr. Melbury understands that this marriage is an emotional disease.

Mr. Melbury's final reflections seem fairly conclusive:

Well-he's her husband . . . and let her take him back to her bed if she will. . . . But let her bear in mind that the woman walks and laughs somewhere at this very moment whose neck he'll be cooling next year as he does hers to-night, and as he did Felice Charmond's last year; and Suke Damson's the year afore! . . . It's a forlorn hope for her; and God knows how it will end! (pp. 439- 40)

We note that the law, which should have brought deserved relief from misery turns out to be unjust and inadequate. It is certain that Hardy does not support the moral judgment implied by the double standards of law that adultery of man is insignificant. Schneir says according to Seneca's Fall's Declaration:

Man has created a false public sentiment by giving to the world a different code of morals for men and women, by which moral delinquencies which exclude women from society, are not only tolerated, but deemed of little account in man. (1996, p. 80)

Another noble character in *The Woodlanders* is Marty South. Marty's character is not drawn in detail but from the very beginning she wins our heart. The novel opens with an important incident in her life and ends with her speech. She is a person with great human potential but her aspirations are never fulfilled due to her social position and probably due to her upbringing to accept her role as a receiver. She loves Giles Winterborne secretly but never makes any outward show to let him know of it. We are filled with pity for her hopeless devotion to a man who has always been beyond her reach. When Grace Melbury tells Marty South that Giles should have married her and nobody else, Marty South says: *"In all our outdoor days and years together, ma'am . . . the one thing he never spoke of to me was love; nor I to him."* (Hardy, p. 400)

Marty South's devotion and endurance is expressed in the death of Giles Winterborne:

"Now, my own, own love, she whispered, you are mine, and only mine; for she has forgot'ee at last, although for her you died! But I-whenver I get up I'll think of 'ee, and whenever I lie down I'll think of 'ee again." (p. 444)

Lack of expression, evident in the Victorian women, is also a subject of disapproval to Hardy. Women should talk and express themselves openly. Women should not be treated as silent dummies or servants. We see that Grace's life is ruined because she is treated by the people closest to her, not as a person but as a commodity to be used in purchasing social status.

In *The Woodlanders* (1887), Hardy has successfully dealt with the conventionality of marriage as an institution, the differences of sexual mores and the pain inflicted on women by men. Hardy attacks the divorce laws in a way never seen before in his earlier novels. He exposes the Victorian morality and marriage laws which crush the human spirit of ordinary souls with no hope of escape from it. Hardy also proves how the law is unjust and unequal between the spouses, besides being extremely unsympathetic to women.

Through the characterization of Grace Melbury, Hardy has effectively demonstrated how the authorities are partial in observing such a law. Dr. Fitzpiers has been living in adultery for which Mr. Melbury provides proof. Yet, the law refuses to grant Grace divorce from her husband on the grounds that he has not done enough harm to her and therefore, he has full right over her. Thus the novel ends on a note of defeat as Grace has no rights and she faces the dilemma of living with a man for whom she has no love. This shows the real sense of docility, which has given a vain life to the Victorian women shackled in the brutal world of the mean and selfish men.

In Hardy's view, marriage is not merely a physical union but a union of ideas and tastes. Emotional and spiritual harmony between husband and wife should be the first consideration. Where there is no love and spirituality, there is no marriage. A matrimony which is based on convention and material condition to sanctify it is the worst form of suffering in the world. In regard to Mill's view of marriage, Ramaswamy and Mukherjee remark:

The relationship between a man and a woman should be based on mutual respect and mutual love, giving due regard to one another's rights. This would make them self-reliant and self-sufficient. Unless the equal and just worth of every human being is recognized they cannot enjoy equal rights nor realize their full potential." (1995, p. 41)

Hardy also added that marriage is a social institution of paramount importance and therefore, it should be purged of all traces of cruelty, artificial faithfulness, and emotional frigidity which result from an ill matched union between man and woman. An easier divorce is a promise and hope for a healthier and happier life. Regarding Hardy's views on marriage, Stubbs says, "*As for the existing laws governing marriage, he called them the gratuitous cause of at least half the misery of the community, and could only account for them as the product of 'a barbaric age' of gross superstition.*" (1979, p. 60)

Conclusion

The study has tried to project women's helpless situation by defying the well-entrenched social customs. It has further stressed the bitter, frustrating struggle of the women characters to define *themselves* in a world that would deny them the right to shape their own lives, control their own bodies, explore their own needs and express their own desires.

The critical tendency has been to assess and to shape Hardy's women according to certain traits and qualities believed to be innate in women: passivity, inconstancy, vanity and so forth.

In *The Woodlanders*, the study has displayed Hardy's successful dealing with the conventionality of marriage as an institution, the differences of sexual mores and the pain inflicted on women by men. Hardy has attacked the divorce laws in a way never seen before in his earlier novels. He has exposed the Victorian morality and marriage laws which crush the human spirit of ordinary souls with no hope of escape from it. He has also proved how the law is unjust and unequal between the spouses, besides being extremely unsympathetic to women.

Through the characterization of Grace Melbury, Hardy has effectively demonstrated how the authorities are partial in observing such a law. Dr. Fitzpiers has been living in adultery for which Mr. Melbury provides proof. Yet, the law refuses to grant Grace divorce from her husband on the grounds that he has not done enough harm to her and therefore, he has full right over her. Thus the novel ends on a note of defeat as Grace has no rights and she faces the dilemma of living with a man for whom she has no love. Grace is also a helpless victim of her father, George Melbury's preoccupation with culture and high social manners. Indeed, she is the most unfortunate victim of male-abuse and social as well as legal injustice which she is forced to put up with for the rest of her life.

Hardy has criticized the social values, which do not create equal chance for the male and female citizens to decide their own destiny the way they feel like. He has tried to highlight the suffering and fluctuation of the women who find themselves crushed under the masculine injustice.

The study shows in its conclusion Hardy's contribution to women's liberation and his untiring efforts to educate men and women about the need to create a healthy society in which women are given due respect and privileges on equal terms. Hardy tried to destroy what he felt was a false order and advocated changes in laws concerning marriage, divorce and maltreatment of women by men. He proves that human beings' longing for happiness is far more important than the social conventions and psychological inhibitions which only suppress and thwart them.

Finally the study comes to its concluding point by suggesting that the only way to gain one's true identity as a woman is neither bow helplessly before the impositions of a man and nor pretend to take revenge from him, but to prove the world that a woman can have her own identity and do not need the mercy and protection of men. As Golomb (2005:143) believes "*the existential question today is not whether to be or not to be, but how one can become what one truly is.*"

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