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Merging Fiction and Reality: Hardy's Portrayal of a Fallen Woman in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

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Abstract

My paper attempts to simultaneously discuss the reality of the 'fallen woman' in the Victorian era and the fiction based on this reality. The narrator of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* has long been accused of being the third pursuer of Tess along with Alec and Angel. He has been held guilty of continuously fawning over Tess's lips and tongue, of rendering her 'passive' during the most crucial moments in her life, of holding her body responsible for her violation. My paper attempts to refute such arguments. In order to do so, this paper not only analyses certain important episodes from the novel as described by the narrator but also seeks to make a comparative study between the narrator and the people who were directly involved in the 'rescue' of the 'fallen women' by setting up penitentiaries for them. The fact that 'fallen women' were treated as patients in the homes called 'penitentiaries' raises two crucial questions. Why did the Victorian society not consider debauchery and predatory nature of the males as a disease? What did the 'fallen women' have to seek penance for? Obviously the self proclaimed harbingers of morality of the Victorian era deliberately avoided answering these questions as that would reveal the hideous selves of those men who were the causes of the 'fall' of the women. My paper concludes by showing how the foundation of the narrator's understanding of 'fallen women', unlike the larger section of the society, was not based on hypocrisy.

Keywords- *Fallen Woman, Violation, Penitentiaries, Debauchery*

On the 13th of April, 1860, an advertisement of the London Diocesan Penitentiary [entitled "Advertisement for the London Diocesan Penitentiary"] was published in The Morning Post asking for "additional superintendence and additional funds, self devoted women to cooperate the work, annual subscriptions and donations to meet the unavoidable increase of expenditure" and also for the enlargement of the Home to accommodate "60, 80 or even 100" 'patients'. As per the advertisement, the penitentiary was established in 1855 and by 1860 it

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already had “40 patients”. The official website of the British Library states that the London Diocesan Penitentiary was “one among around 50 in mid-19th century London. A pamphlet published in London in 1868, entitled “Rescue of Fallen Women. A Statement Containing A Proposal” with the sub-title in block letters: “The adoption of which may increase the facilities for effecting the rescue of fallen women” (Ryder 1) enlisted the names of “all the Penitentiaries, Refuges, Homes for Fallen Women in 1868, in London and its neighbourhood”. The pamphlet enlisted twenty six penitentiaries and the total accommodations of all them were one thousand and seventy six. So, mid- nineteenth century had more than thousand fallen women *officially*. The reformer, J. Ewing Ritchie in his 1857 survey, *The Night Side of London* stated that approximately 500 people were drowned in Thames every year. Out of the 500 drowned, there were a high number of suicides of prostitutes (qtd. in Nead 169). Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* was published towards the end of the nineteenth century [November 1891] and definitely, the number of fallen women in the society must have increased officially and unofficially by then. It might have been possible to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to the social realities of the fallen women but it was surely impossible to remain ignorant about it. It is in this situation that Hardy’s *Tess* was published. My paper would like to show how Thomas Hardy’s narrator has portrayed a fallen woman in the hypocritical Victorian society in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and how his understanding of the fallen woman is intrinsically different from the ones who were directly involved with them in setting up penitentiaries and homes for their rescue and welfare. My paper also attempts to refute the arguments of some critics like Penny Boumelha, who has accused the narrator to be the third violator of Tess (120) and Lyn Pykett who has argued that Hardy lays the blame on Tess’s body for her sexual violation (160).

Phase the First closes with Tess’s violation by Alec D’ Urberville. Instead of giving graphic descriptions of the incident, the narrator writes that Tess was “in the hands of the spoiler” (Hardy 74; ch. XI). The narrator does not brand Tess a temptress. He does not agree with “Tess’s own people” who believed that her violation was inevitable (Hardy 74; chp XI). He also does not justify the incident by taking it to be a form of divine punishment meted to her for the wrongdoings of her ancestors. Her beauty, her body or her ancestral history— nothing can justify the sexual violation of the innocent sixteen-year old Tess. The narrator clearly states “why so often the coarse appropriates the finer thus, many thousand years of analytical philosophy have failed to explain to our sense of order” (Hardy 74; ch. XI).

Lyn Pykett has argued that Tess’s body, beauty and sexuality, which she was unconscious of, play important roles in her doom. She becomes “guiltily and burdensomely aware” of her body only after her violation. Pykett even quotes a passage [describing Tess’s bosom on which Alec rested his eyes the first time he met her] from the novel to show how before her violation, “Tess is repeatedly described as ‘unconscious’ of her body, and

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‘innocent’ of her own physical charms” (160). But, she does not quote the last line of the passage which clearly mentions that Tess was always conscious of her bodily features: “It [Tess’s bosom] had troubled her mind occasionally, till her companions had said that it was a fault which time would cure” (Hardy 43; ch. V). Pykett goes on to argue that Hardy puts much of the blame on Tess’s “ample bosom” and “fresh rustic beauty” who “has no other choice but to be a sexual temptress to any healthy male she encounters” and therefore, she mutilates herself later in the novel when she becomes conscious of her body (160). Conscious as she always was about her body, what Tess realises after her violation is, the predatory nature of the male, who is always ready to pounce on female flesh. Through Tess’s self mutilation, the narrator is attacking the Victorian society which has given the males the license to rampantly exercise their sexual urge any time they like, so much so that a girl needs to mutilate herself by shaving her eyebrows in order to avoid the pervert male gaze. Debauchery is not limited only to Alec. When Tess was having her breakfast at an inn in Chalk-Newton, “several young men were troublesomely compliment[ing] to her good looks” (Hardy 280; ch. XLII). After her violation, Tess realises that violators are everywhere and are always ready to devour the females— “I merely did it [shaved eyebrows] not to be molested” (Hardy 282; ch. XLII). The people in charge of the penitentiaries believed in cutting the hair of “inmates” short in order to reduce their “sexual allure” (Barley 38). The difference between the people in charge of penitentiaries and the narrator is that: One blamed the females for enticement; another blamed the males for their perversion. Is not debauchery a disease then, among the males of the Victorian society? Are not the males the patients of debauchery then? Don’t the males need to be admitted to homes for their treatment? Bartley states that only Josephine Butler and “a few other radical individuals” put forward the question of setting up penitentiaries for males but nothing concrete was done (31). Thus, the Victorian society chose women to be the scapegoat and pay the price for the male debauchery and branded the women admitted in penitentiaries as ‘patients’.

Boumelha has argued that Tess suffers violation not only at the hands of her two lovers but also at the hands of the narrator because “Time and again the narrator seeks to enter Tess, through her eyes... through her mouth... and through her flesh” (120). Even Pykett has observed that the narrator’s gaze repeatedly returns to the “delights of Tess’s mouth” (159). Had the narrator really fawned on Tess’s lips, he would have stuck in describing *only and only* Tess’s lips. But, the narrator doesn’t do so. At various stages of the novel, he focuses on the lips of Alec and Angel too. When the readers are introduced to Angel Clare at the Talbothays Dairy the narrator writes about Angel having “a mobility of mouth somewhat too small and delicately lined for a man’s... with an unexpectedly firm close of the lower lip now and then; enough to do away with any suggestion of indecision” (Hardy 113; ch. XVIII). When Angel discovers a striking resemblance between the portrait of the “D’Urberville

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dame” and Tess, his “small compressed mouth index[ed] his powers of self control” signifying that he was no longer the slave of passion (Hardy 235; ch. XXXVI). When Tess meets Alec for the first time, the narrator imbibes lust and sinisterness in his “badly moulded” “full lips” which are “red and smooth” below his “well-groomed black moustache with curled points” (Hardy 40; ch. V). The narrator describes the converted Alec by his shape and curves of his lip that meant to express “supplication” and “devotional passion” instead of “seductiveness” and “sensuousness” (Hardy 305; ch. XLV). It can be well understood that time and again the narrator not only returns to Tess’s lips but also to the lips of Alec and Angel. Therefore, it can be argued that the narrator of the novel is not the third violator of Tess, as he does not keep his eyes only on her lips alone. Some external feature has to be chosen for portraying a fictional character and the narrator of *Tess* chooses the shape, curves and subtle movements of the lips.

Boumelha also argues that “Tess is asleep, or in reverie, at almost every crucial turn of the plot... Tess is most herself— and that is, most woman— when she is dumb and semi-conscious” (121). She enlists a number of episodes from the novel to prove her point: the death of Prince, the ‘seduction’ of Tess by Alec, the virtual burial of Tess by a somnambulist Angel and the arrest of Tess in Stonehenge as the “crucial turn[s] of plot” (Boumelha 121). One of the most powerful and crucial episodes in the novel which Boumelha doesn’t point out is the baptism and the burial of Tess’s illegitimate infant by her. Tess is not asleep or in reverie during the last few hours of Sorrow’s life. Rather, she takes up the role of the priest upon herself, baptises her son and christens him Sorrow. In a society where “a fall from virtue was final” (Nead 49) and “there could be no movement from one category to another” (Nead 49) [that is, there could be no reversion from the ‘fallen’ state to the ‘respected’ state], the baptism of Tess is a direct blow on the Victorian conventions. By elevating Tess to a “divine”, “towering”, “immaculate” and “regal” (Hardy 94-94; ch. XIV) stature, the narrator does not transfer her from one category to another but makes her transcend all binaries and all categories constructed by the society to define women. The fallen woman does not rise to divine grace, rather, becomes the Divine herself.

There are several moments in the course of the novel when Tess protests; when she proves that she is not ‘dumb’ or ‘semi-conscious’. She “burst[s] out” (Hardy 97; ch. XIV) at the parson that she won’t ever enter the church premises when he refuses to bury her illegitimate son. She “passionately” (Hardy 309; ch. XLV) cries out at Alec that people like him exploit girls like Tess to the utmost level and when they are done, they pretend to become converted. She “passionately” (Hardy 331; ch. XLVII) flings her leather glove at Alec making his mouth bleed after he repeatedly pesters her with the indecent proposal of living with him. She writes in one of her letters to Angel that she will never forgive him for his ruthless attitude towards her which she did not deserve at all. Most importantly, “Tess’s

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‘No’ had meant ‘No’” (Dutta, *Ambivalence in Hardy* 206). Tess could have agreed to marry Alec. That way she could have saved herself and her son from the shame of the Victorian society. But she clearly mentions time and again that she doesn’t love Alec. The ‘arrogant assumption [“that a woman’s ‘No’ actually means ‘Yes’”] ... is the justification that Alec d’urberville offers for having taken advantage of Tess” (Dutta, *Ambivalence in Hardy* 205-206) cannot work out in Tess’s case because when she says ‘No’, she means it. Hardy’s narrator shatters stereotypes about women with one statement of Tess: “How can you dare to use those words! ... Did it never strike your mind that what every woman says some may feel?” (Hardy 77; ch. XII). Tess is capable of passion. Had she been ‘semi-conscious’, she would have accepted Alec’s proposition of marriage.

Perhaps the episode in *Tess* where the narrator best exposes the moral and sexual double standards of the Victorian society is the one where Tess and Angel confess to each other the dark anecdotes of their past on their wedding night. The nature of both their sins [if at all we consider Tess’s violation to be her sin] is essentially the same. Both were involved in a sexual encounter before marriage: Tess with Alec and Angel with a prostitute. There is still debate among scholars regarding the ambiguity of the sexual encounter of Tess and Alec but there can be no two ways about Angel’s sexual adventure with a “stranger” in London spanning across a stretch of “eight-and-forty hours” (Hardy 225; ch. XXXIV). On learning Angel’s history, Tess forgives him but on learning Tess’s history, Angel abandons her. Why has the society set different parameters for judging the male and the female for the same sin? Why is it so that what becomes the highway to moral awakening for Angel, becomes “grotesque prestidigitation” (Hardy 228; ch. XXXV) for Tess? Why is it that the image of a woman changes completely after a pre-marital lapse and a man’s doesn’t? Why is it that Angel cannot forgive Tess for the same sin for which he had been forgiven by Tess moments ago? Numerous questions such as these are asked by the narrator through one question: “Yet could a woman who had done even what she had done deserve all this?” (Hardy 253; ch. XXXVII).

Angel is the epitome of Victorian double standards. On the one hand, he expects to be forgiven by his wife for his own pre-marital lapse and on the other hand, he cannot even think of accepting Tess as his wife knowing fully well that Tess was “more sinned against than sinning” (Hardy 232; ch. XXXV). On the one hand, he claims himself to be progressive and on the other hand, he judges a woman’s purity by her body. On the one hand, he “plays the moral high priest” (Dutta, “Teaching Tess in Kolkata” 31) and on the other hand, asks the unmarried Izz Huett to go with him in Brazil.

In the end, Tess ends up in the gallows not because, as Bayley says (qtd. in Boumelha 121), the narrator could not possess Tess, but, because the narrator wants to convey the message that no matter how hard a fallen woman tries to escape her predicament, people like

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Alec will always exploit them; husbands like Angel will always abandon them; the society with its double standards will always condemn them. With the death of Tess, the narrator tries to warn the society to genuinely do something before it's too late. Having an optimistic ending for Tess would not have produced the fear; the goose bumps that Tess's death had produced.

What is remarkable about the narrative is that the narrator does not make the novel didactic. He puts forward questions and ironical comments regarding Tess and the Victorian society which is way more effective than pouring information down the throat of readers. The best example of ironical comment is obviously the first line of the last paragraph— “‘Justice’ was done” (Hardy 397; ch. LIX). Questions and ironical comments pierce the hearts of the readers and force them to reflect about the social conventions and question them.

The advertisement mentioned in the beginning of the paper stated that “after leaving the institution, they [fallen women] are carefully regarded and need never suffer from the want of a kind and helping hand, *if only they maintain a good character*”. The words used in this advertisement defeat the very purpose of setting up a home for fallen women— offering them a helping hand. People who were officially engaged in rescuing fallen women did not understand that fallen woman did not fall on their own. There was a male responsible for her fall. What these rescuers did in the garb of rescue was to socially segregate the fallen women as they were thought to be “ruinous to civilisation” (Bartley 30). Were not people who were actively engaged in the rescue work supposed to understand the fallen women better, since they were observing them from such a close distance? But the ones who sought to rescue fallen women ultimately ended up condemning them by upholding the Victorian moral and sexual double standards. Hardy's narrator differs sharply from them in this aspect. He never blames Tess for her misfortunes. He doesn't create Tess out of stereotypical templates. He doesn't make her just a passive victim. That is why, he never pities or patronises her. He does not offer Tess a helping hand, rather lays his “bosom as a bed” to “lodge” her “poor wounded” self. He “faithfully” represents a “pure woman”. The subtitle of the novel signifies that Hardy's narrator does not ascribe purity of a woman's character to her body, unlike the people setting up penitentiaries. Not only Hardy's narrator, but as Professor Dutta points out, Thomas Hardy himself “was clear-sighted enough to recognize that... in a patriarchal society it was usually the woman who was meanly taken advantage of”. He always sympathised with “exploited women, especially women marginalised by society” in his writings (*Ambivalence* 202).

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