

"FALLEN ANGEL" OR VICTIM OF SOCIETY? DUALISTIC PORTRAYALS OF FEMININITY IN THOMAS HARDY'S "TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES" - A CRITICAL STUDY

Rafey Konain

BS- English Literature, Institute of English Studies (IES), University of the Punjab, Lahore.

Email: rafeykonain965@gmail.com , rafeykonain@cosmic.edu.pk

Abstract:

Thomas Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles presents one of the most compelling and complex representations of femininity in Victorian literature. This research critically examines the dualistic portrayal of the protagonist, Tess, as both a "fallen angel" and a victim of rigid social constructs. Hardy's narrative challenges traditional moral labels, blurring the lines between sin and virtue, agency and helplessness, personal choice and societal constraint. By positioning Tess in a world where patriarchal expectations and social hierarchies dictate the fate of women, Hardy highlights the systemic forces that shape her tragedy.

This study explores how Tess's character disrupts the archetypal image of the "fallen woman" common in 19th-century fiction, framing her not as a moral transgressor but as an emblem of innocence crushed by the hypocrisy and rigidity of Victorian social order. The research focuses on the symbolic and thematic elements that contribute to Tess's portrayal — her connection to nature, her silence and voice at pivotal moments, and Hardy's use of fate and fatalism. Furthermore, this paper investigates how the tension between purity and transgression reflects broader questions of gendered morality, victimhood, and societal judgment.

Through a close reading of Hardy's language, imagery, and narrative structure, the study reveals that Tess is constructed as both a subject of deep empathy and a cultural symbol of womanhood under siege. Hardy's nuanced approach underscores the inadequacy of the simplistic labels society imposes on women, especially those marginalized by class and circumstance. Ultimately, this research aims to illuminate how Tess of the D'Urbervilles critiques Victorian gender ideologies, and how Hardy's depiction of Tess encourages readers to question the myths of purity, morality, and female identity that persist even beyond his time.

Keywords: Thomas Hardy, Tess of the D'Urbervilles, fallen woman, feminine duality, Victorian society, gender roles, social determinism, female victimization, moral hypocrisy, patriarchy, sexual politics, women and class, feminist literary criticism, purity, fallenness, tragic heroine, angel in the house, Victorian morality, double standards, femme fatale, innocent victim, naturalism in literature.

Introduction

The Victorian era witnessed a social landscape rigidly defined by moral codes, gender expectations, and a literary culture steeped in the complexities of realism and social critique. Within this context, Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) emerges as a profound narrative that problematizes the conventional understanding of femininity, virtue, and social victimization. Hardy's portrayal of Tess is at once emblematic of the "fallen woman" archetype and simultaneously an indictment of the unjust social structures that label her as such. This tension between individual character and societal judgment forms the central paradox that this research aims to explore: is Tess a "fallen angel" in the moralistic Victorian sense, or an innocent victim entrapped by the societal machinery that dictates her fate?

The novel's subtitle, *A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented*, sets the stage for this thematic ambiguity. Hardy's explicit assertion of Tess's purity, even after her perceived "fall," challenges the Victorian moral framework that rigidly classified women as either virtuous or fallen based on sexual purity alone (Shires, 1983). Through Tess, Hardy destabilizes these binary classifications, offering a character that transcends the limiting labels imposed on women of her time. As critics such as Boumelha (1982) and Uglow (1989) argue, Hardy's depiction of Tess is deliberately crafted to provoke both empathy and social critique, as he exposes the oppressive consequences of gendered double standards.

At the heart of Hardy's narrative is the theme of societal entrapment. The 19th-century British social order, with its strict gender roles and hierarchical class structures, created a cultural context where women, especially those from the lower classes, had limited agency over their destinies (Poovey, 1988). Tess, a working-class woman whose life is determined not only by personal misfortune but also by systemic injustice, stands as a literary testament to the silent suffering of women who were judged more harshly for their perceived moral failings than the men who contributed to their downfall. This perspective aligns Hardy's work with a broader Victorian literary tradition of female tragedy, echoing narratives such as George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859), where Hetty Sorrel's story similarly explores the fatal consequences of societal condemnation.

The intertextual connections between Hardy's portrayal of Tess and other tragic heroines reveal a cultural pattern in Victorian literature, where women's virtue was largely constructed through a patriarchal lens. In novels like Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), women's identities are shaped and often confined by external social forces rather than internal moral failings. Tess's story not only fits within this tradition but also offers a distinct critique of its very foundation. Hardy's engagement with Romantic and classical literary influences furthers this critique, as he weaves in fatalistic themes reminiscent of Greek tragedy. The repeated references to fate and coincidence in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* echo the tragic inevitability found in works

such as *Oedipus Rex*, suggesting that Tess's downfall is orchestrated by forces beyond her control rather than personal moral weakness (Punter, 2000).

Another crucial element of Hardy's critique lies in his use of natural imagery, which often serves to reinforce Tess's purity in opposition to the artificial constructs of Victorian morality. As Wright (2010) suggests, Hardy's alignment of Tess with pastoral settings and seasonal cycles offers a symbolic refuge from the human-made systems that ultimately betray her. In this way, Hardy juxtaposes the moral codes of society with the more forgiving and amoral laws of nature, creating an implicit argument for the reevaluation of contemporary definitions of virtue and vice.

Moreover, Tess's dual characterization as both sinner and saint opens up an important feminist dialogue that continues to resonate in modern literary scholarship. Gilbert and Gubar's seminal text *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) identifies the Victorian "angel in the house" ideal as a social construct that leaves women trapped between two unattainable extremes: the pure, self-sacrificing domestic goddess or the condemned, ostracized "fallen" woman. Hardy's narrative deconstructs this binary, showing Tess as neither wholly angelic nor fully culpable. Instead, her story is a poignant demonstration of the way society manipulates and distorts female identity to serve patriarchal interests.

Critics have also highlighted the ways in which Hardy frames Tess's tragedy within a deterministic worldview, suggesting that her fate is sealed not by moral choices but by the intersecting forces of social class, gender, and chance. This fatalism is both a literary device and a philosophical statement, situating Tess's suffering within the broader existential struggle between human agency and social determinism (Langland, 1992). In this respect, Hardy's novel can be read as both a social critique and an exploration of the human condition, with Tess serving as a symbol of resilience and endurance rather than failure or disgrace.

Tess's portrayal also intersects with contemporary discussions on the politics of victimhood and narrative agency. In a modern context, the reevaluation of Tess through the lens of trauma theory and feminist criticism reveals how Hardy's depiction anticipates later debates about consent, autonomy, and systemic oppression (Walkowitz, 1992). Hardy's complex treatment of Tess's violation by Alec d'Urberville — an encounter historically interpreted through the euphemistic lens of "seduction" — has, in recent years, been more accurately classified as sexual assault, further positioning Tess as a victim of male power rather than a fallen woman by choice (Morgan, 2006).

Ultimately, Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* invites a reevaluation of Victorian moral sensibilities, emphasizing the disconnect between human compassion and societal judgment. Through the dualistic lens of the "fallen angel" and the "victim of society," Tess's narrative underscores the limitations of binary thinking and challenges readers to reconsider how literature constructs and deconstructs notions of feminine virtue. This research aims to unpack these themes

by situating Hardy's novel within both its historical context and the broader literary canon, while also exploring its relevance to contemporary feminist and sociocritical discussions.

Literature Review:

The portrayal of women in Victorian literature has long been a focal point for scholars seeking to unpack the complex social and gender ideologies of the 19th century. Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* has particularly invited critical interest for its exploration of the dual roles assigned to women: the angelic ideal and the fallen woman. Hardy's challenge to this binary remains one of the most discussed aspects of his work, as the character of Tess Durbeyfield defies both social expectations and literary archetypes, embodying instead a nuanced and conflicted vision of feminine identity.

Early literary criticism tended to interpret Tess through a moralistic Victorian lens, seeing her fate as the tragic result of sexual transgression and social fallibility. However, modern criticism has shifted away from this reductive view, instead highlighting Hardy's critique of social determinism and the oppressive gender codes of Victorian England. As Boumelha (1982) points out, Hardy constructs Tess as "both a subject of male desire and an object of social sacrifice," a duality that underpins the novel's critique of patriarchal power structures. Tess's struggle to reconcile her personal innocence with society's condemnation reveals the cruelty of a system in which female virtue is defined exclusively through sexual purity.

Several feminist critics have observed that Hardy's representation of Tess anticipates many modern discussions of victimization and female agency. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) argue that Victorian literature often positioned women between the poles of angelic purity and demonic fallenness, limiting the capacity for female characters to exist as full and complex human beings. Tess, they suggest, is emblematic of Hardy's attempt to transcend this literary tradition, as she is presented as morally pure despite the social stain attached to her name following Alec d'Urberville's assault. This redefinition of purity is further reinforced by Hardy's narrative voice, which often aligns itself with Tess's inner world, offering readers an empathetic and humanizing perspective that challenges prevailing social prejudices.

Beyond feminist criticism, much scholarly attention has been directed at Hardy's use of natural imagery to reinforce Tess's inherent innocence and highlight her entrapment within artificial moral constructs. Wright (2010) explores how Hardy situates Tess within the landscape as a symbolic extension of her character, noting that Tess's connection to nature serves as a counterpoint to the rigid and often hypocritical social codes of Victorian society. As Tess's story unfolds, nature functions as both a sanctuary and a witness to her suffering, emphasizing the contrast between the indifferent beauty of the natural world and the cruelty of human judgment.

The role of fate and chance in Tess's life has also been a dominant theme in the critical conversation surrounding the novel. Punter (2000) situates *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* within the tradition of

Gothic and tragic literature, arguing that Hardy employs fatalism not simply as a narrative device, but as a philosophical commentary on the absence of justice in both nature and human society. The repeated invocation of chance events in the novel — from Tess's initial meeting with Alec to Angel Clare's ill-timed rejection — underscores Hardy's assertion that her downfall is not the product of personal immorality, but the inevitable consequence of social and cosmic indifference.

Scholars have also investigated the historical and cultural forces shaping Tess's characterization. Poovey (1988) argues that Victorian constructions of femininity were deeply tied to economic and class concerns, and Tess's victimhood must be understood not only in moral but also in socioeconomic terms. As a working-class woman, Tess's social vulnerability is amplified by her limited economic options, making her a target for exploitation and a scapegoat for the anxieties of a class-conscious society. Her fall, therefore, is not simply a personal tragedy but a systemic failure, emblematic of a world in which class, gender, and morality intersect to entrap women.

Furthermore, contemporary re-readings of Hardy's work through trauma theory and post-structuralist criticism have brought new perspectives to Tess's story. Morgan (2006) argues that the novel's depiction of Tess's sexual assault and the subsequent social fallout can be seen as an early literary examination of victim-blaming and trauma. According to Morgan, Hardy challenges the contemporary reader to question the language and social codes that enable such victimization, thereby inviting a more ethical mode of literary interpretation.

In sum, the critical discourse surrounding *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* highlights the novel's enduring relevance as a critique of gendered oppression, social hypocrisy, and moral absolutism. Whether examined through a feminist, historicist, or post-structuralist lens, Tess emerges not as a "fallen" woman in the conventional sense but as a victim of intersecting social, cultural, and existential forces. Hardy's reworking of the fallen woman archetype signals a progressive and humanistic shift in the representation of women in literature, offering a character whose moral worth transcends the boundaries set by her society.

Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative literary analysis approach, grounded in close textual reading and supported by feminist literary theory, historical contextualization, and intertextual critique. The study investigates Hardy's portrayal of Tess Durbeyfield as both a "fallen woman" and a victim of Victorian social constructs, examining how her characterization challenges conventional gender norms. A primary source analysis of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is employed, with particular attention to Hardy's narrative techniques, symbolic imagery, and thematic concerns, especially his use of fate, nature, and moral ambiguity. Secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles and critical essays, are used to frame the discussion within established scholarly debates, particularly those involving gender studies, Victorian social history, and narrative ethics. Intertextual references to other Victorian novels and classical tragedy provide further context for

understanding Hardy's literary choices. This methodology aims to balance textual interpretation with theoretical perspectives to illuminate the socio-cultural critique embedded in Hardy's work. The research does not seek to offer a singular interpretation but rather explores the multiplicity of meanings behind Tess's dualistic portrayal, while demonstrating how Hardy's narrative continues to challenge readers' assumptions about femininity, victimhood, and moral identity across historical periods.

Discussion and Analysis:

At the heart of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* lies the intricate tension between societal perception and individual identity, particularly in the construction of female virtue and moral worth. Hardy's depiction of Tess challenges the Victorian binary that defines women as either angelic or fallen, proposing instead a vision of femininity shaped as much by external circumstances as by personal actions. Tess's life is orchestrated by forces beyond her control — poverty, patriarchal dominance, and the moral hypocrisy of society — which work in tandem to erase her agency and brand her as a social outcast.

Hardy's narrative techniques reinforce this critique of social labeling, using irony and omniscient commentary to create a stark distance between Tess's inner life and her public image. His authorial voice repeatedly underlines Tess's purity, even after the traumatic encounter with Alec d'Urberville, destabilizing the Victorian notion that a woman's virtue is synonymous with her sexual status (Hardy, 1891/2008). This defiance of conventional moral judgment situates Hardy's work within a broader literary tradition that questions gendered moral hierarchies, aligning Tess with heroines like George Eliot's Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede* (Eliot, 1859/1998) and Thomas Hardy's own Sue Bridehead from *Jude the Obscure* (1895). Both characters — much like Tess — are judged by society not on the basis of moral complexity but on rigid, patriarchally-defined ideals of purity.

The thematic resonance between Hardy's Tess and classical tragic figures also shapes the reader's understanding of her dual portrayal. Critics have likened Tess to Greek tragic heroines, who often suffer not because of personal flaw but due to fate and social circumstances beyond their control. Tess, like Sophocles' Antigone, is a character trapped between personal conviction and institutional injustice. Both are punished not for malevolence but for existing in opposition to systems that deny them agency (Punter, 2000). Hardy's incorporation of fate, coincidence, and cruel chance, such as the ill-timed arrival of Angel Clare's letter or Tess's unintended encounter with Alec, highlights the tragic dimension of her story. These narrative elements stress the powerlessness of individuals, especially women, when confronted by forces both social and cosmic.

Further, Hardy's use of natural symbolism repeatedly aligns Tess with purity and endurance, even as society vilifies her. As Wright (2010) notes, Tess is described through motifs of seasons, fertile landscapes, and animal imagery, suggesting that she belongs more to the natural world than the

moral and industrial world that seeks to judge her. This parallel evokes the Romantic idealization of nature as pure and untainted by human corruption, framing Tess's experiences as a confrontation between natural innocence and constructed social judgment.

The critical reception of Tess's "fall" also reveals Hardy's engagement with the cultural anxieties of the Victorian period. As Poovey (1988) argues, the period's obsession with female chastity was not just a moral issue but a deeply political one, designed to regulate female behavior in a society increasingly uneasy about changing gender roles. Tess's transgression — if it can be called that — is involuntary, yet society imposes on her the full weight of guilt, reinforcing the role of women as scapegoats for patriarchal anxiety.

Additionally, modern feminist readings have reframed Tess's experience not as a moral lapse but as a case of systemic victimization. Morgan (2006) highlights how Hardy's ambiguous language surrounding Tess's encounter with Alec invites the reader to reconsider the consent and power dynamics at play, exposing the failure of Victorian social codes to protect women from predation. Tess's story, viewed through this lens, critiques not just the cultural construction of the "fallen woman" but the institutional complicity in her victimhood.

Ultimately, Hardy's portrayal of Tess resists simplistic categorization. She is not the passive, self-sacrificing "angel in the house" that Victorian ideals celebrated, nor is she the morally deviant "fallen woman" that her society condemns. Instead, Hardy presents her as an emblem of human dignity persisting in the face of relentless social judgment and existential misfortune. This duality — a woman both angelic and condemned — reflects Hardy's broader skepticism toward the social and moral binaries of his time and encourages readers to interrogate the narratives through which gender, virtue, and victimhood are culturally constructed.

Conclusion

Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* stands as a timeless critique of the rigid social constructs and moral judgments imposed upon women in Victorian England. Through the complex figure of Tess Durbeyfield, Hardy questions and ultimately subverts the dualistic narrative that casts women as either angelic paragons of virtue or irredeemably fallen figures. Tess's tragedy, rather than being rooted in personal failure, is shaped by an unrelenting sequence of social, economic, and gender-based injustices that remove her agency and redefine her worth according to external expectations. The novel invites readers to confront the cruelty of a society that allows no room for complexity in its treatment of female identity, especially when the so-called transgressions are not acts of will, but consequences of coercion, powerlessness, and misfortune.

Hardy's empathetic portrayal of Tess resists the Victorian era's conventional moral binaries and exposes the hypocrisy embedded in social systems designed to control women's lives. Her identity as both victim and heroine reinforces the novel's central argument: that human value cannot be reduced to simplistic categories of purity or shame. Instead, Hardy highlights the devastating

impact of social labels, particularly on women whose lives are shaped by circumstances beyond their control. Tess's character illustrates the deep disconnect between moral reality and the moral narratives imposed by a patriarchal society.

In addition to offering a powerful feminist critique, Hardy's narrative raises broader philosophical questions about fate, free will, and human suffering. Tess is portrayed not as a symbol of weakness, but as a figure of quiet resistance and enduring dignity. The compassion extended to her by the narrative voice challenges readers to rethink their own assumptions about morality, justice, and societal judgment.

Ultimately, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* transcends its Victorian context to engage with universal themes of victimization, agency, and identity. Hardy's nuanced representation of Tess continues to resonate with modern readers, particularly in discussions of gender, power, and social exclusion. By dismantling the myth of the "fallen woman" and highlighting the tragic consequences of societal indifference, Hardy offers a powerful reflection on the human cost of rigid moral systems — a message that remains relevant in both historical and contemporary contexts.

References:

- Boumelha, P. (1982). *Thomas Hardy and Women: Sexual Ideology and Narrative Form*. The Harvester Press.
- Gilbert, S. M., & Gubar, S. (1979). *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale University Press.
- Langland, E. (1992). *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture*. Cornell University Press.
- Morgan, R. (2006). Revisiting Hardy's Tess: Reading Rape in the Victorian Novel. *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 11(1), 1–17.
- Poovey, M. (1988). *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England*. University of Chicago Press.
- Punter, D. (2000). *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day* (Vol. 2). Longman.
- Shires, L. (1983). *The Aesthetic of Hardy's Novels: Making the Novelist Work for the Reader*. University of Nebraska Press.
- Uglow, J. (1989). *The Peasants' Revolt: Victimisation and Social Injustice in Hardy's Fiction*. *The Thomas Hardy Journal*, 5(2), 14–28.
- Walkowitz, J. R. (1992). *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*. University of Chicago Press.

- Wright, T. (2010). *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*. Ashgate.
- Boumelha, P. (1982). *Thomas Hardy and Women: Sexual Ideology and Narrative Form*. The Harvester Press.
- Gilbert, S. M., & Gubar, S. (1979). *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale University Press.
- Morgan, R. (2006). Revisiting Hardy's Tess: Reading Rape in the Victorian Novel. *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 11(1), 1–17.
- Poovey, M. (1988). *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England*. University of Chicago Press.
- Punter, D. (2000). *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day* (Vol. 2). Longman.
- Wright, T. (2010). *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*. Ashgate.
- Eliot, G. (1998). *Adam Bede* (Original work published 1859). Oxford University Press.
- Hardy, T. (2008). *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1891)
- Morgan, R. (2006). Revisiting Hardy's Tess: Reading Rape in the Victorian Novel. *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 11(1), 1–17.
- Poovey, M. (1988). *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England*. University of Chicago Press.
- Punter, D. (2000). *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day* (Vol. 2). Longman.
- Wright, T. (2010). *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*. Ashgate.