PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY AND WOMEN’S FATE IN THOMAS HARDY’S “TESS OF d’URVERVILLES”

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Abstract:

The novel ‘Tess of d’Urbervilles’ (1891) limns the life of a very beautiful girl named Tess and her struggle against Victorian social norms. For a long time all goes on well. But one day her father knows from a person about their descendent from the noble d’Urbervilles. It leads her parents to dream high things. To fulfill the desire of her parents she was compelled to go to work in a rich lady’s poultry farm. There, she was victim of patriarchal mindset, rich lady’s son Alec d’Urbervilles had physically and sexually assaulted her and made her pregnant. This incident forced her to return home with anger and frustration in mind but she could do nothing as nobody would listen to her. After some time she gave birth to a child but the child died. She again worked as a dairy maid on the Talbothay’s farm to eradicate hunger and financial crisis. In this farm, she met Angle Clare, the son of a clergyman. They fell in love but her past life and miscommunication became obstacle on their future life. To follow the established norms of the society, Angle deserted her. Her life again became full of sorrow and pain. In the search of work she again met Alec. He had again taken this opportunity to molest Tess. Her poverty and unavoidable circumstance compelled her to surrender before Alec. To win Angle back and liberate from all these social norms of the society; she murdered Alec. She was arrested and sentenced to death. In this way, a pure woman paid her debt to the social norms and code. This paper is an attempt to paint the picture of Victorian women in the form of Tess and her subsequent struggle against patriarchy and social code.

Abstract: Social norms, victim, patriarchal, frustration, pregnant, struggle, liberate, cage, poverty, society.

Discussion:

Thomas Hardy was an English novelist and poet. He was highly critical of much in Victorian society, especially on the declining status of rural people in Britain. Many of his novels concern tragic characters struggling against their passion and social circumstances, and they are often set in semi-fictional region of Wessex. ‘A man is what he is made’- this line is true for Thomas Hardy as well as he was profoundly influenced by his age and environments. His was the age when science and Industrial Revolution were making their influence feet. But despite revolution of science and technology; the perspective towards women were the same as it was before. And with the novel ‘Tess of d’Urbervilles’; Hardy tried to portray the plight of women in Victorian society. In the novel ‘Tess of d’Urbervilles’, Alec d’Urbervilles is a symbol of patriarchal mentality and power. On the one hand, Alec left no stone unturned to
exploit Tess. On the other hand, Tess’s family did every little thing possible to convince her to go to work in a farm in the hope of good marriage and social expectation. The first incident of patriarchal influence can be seen-

When Tess began to look after the fowls of Mrs. d’Urberville, she started visiting the marketing of Chaseborough on every Saturday. Once she went there somehow late. When she finished her marketing, she tried to search out her friends- who had come to the fair to enjoy drinking and dancing. She could not return home alone. She happened to meet Alec in the fair. He followed her to the house of a hay-trusser and peat-dealer where her comrades had gone to enjoy themselves. Then Alec offered her to take her home but she refused to accompany him. Tess started with her comrades at about eleven o’clock. She enjoyed the moonlight very much- one of the latest favorites of Alec named Car presented a strangely ridiculous sight when some sweet syrup began to flow down her back. When Tess laughed at her along with other people, Car objected to it. When Tess said that she should not have come with a whore like her, all the comrades criticized to her badly. It made her angry and she stood apart. It was at this moment of fear and anger that Alec rode up to her and made her mount her horse. On the way he made her busy in talking and took her far away to the oldest wood of England. Tess was extremely tired so she became drowsy and her head sank gently against Alec. At this Alec enclosed her waist with his arm to support her. She pushed him a little so the escaped rolling over into the road. This thing made Alec Angry. This time he forced her to let him clasp his arm round her. When she came to know that she had lost the way, she asked Alec to put her down. She said that she would go on foot. At last, Alec d’Urberville left her at a place and went to find out the road to the village. Tess was very tired, so she felt asleep on a bed of dry leaves with his light overcoat upon her body. When Alec d’Urberville returned and found her sleeping, he stopped her so low that his cheek came into contact with hers. Then the devil in him defiled the chastity of unguarded and semiconscious Tess. No guardian angel came to save her chastity. Perhaps the god of her simple faith was talking, pursuing or journeying while Alec succeeded in his evil designs on her. It was under these circumstances that the chastity of Tess was defiled by Alec d’Urberville. Alec felt nothing about her and she was left pregnant by this patriarchal figure and it proved that women’s fates are in the hands of men and society.

In addition, Tess’s parents were responsible for driving her to her ruin. Her parents were confined under social codes and they imposed this to Tess which ultimately led her to tragic fall. The family of Tess’s parents consisted of a number of persons. Jack Durbeyfield was the head of the family. Tess was the eldest daughter in the family. She was about to be sixteen or seventeen years. Lizalu was her sister. She was twelve and a half years old. Abraham was her nine years old brother. Next in juvenility came two more girls, Hope and Modesty. Then there came a boy of three and then the baby who had just completed his first year. All the young souls were passengers in the Durbeyfield ship. They were diametrically dependent on the judgement of the Durbeyfield adults for their leisures, for their necessities and even their existence. If their parents chose to sail into difficulty, disaster, starvation, disease, these half-dozen little captives were forced to sail there. When their horse named Prince was killed in an accident these children and their parents forced her to Trantridge and work there for moneyon a fowl-farm. Their poverty and affliction drove poor and defiled her chastity. It was he who drove her to doom.
Tess’s father was proud old man. Upon hearing that he belonged to the noble family, he became mad with happiness. He celebrated this discovery with heavy drinking, so he could not drive the cart taking the beehives to Casterbridge on the market day. Thus he became indirectly responsible for the death of his own horse that earned bread for the family. Ultimately, the patriarchal lifestyle of Tess’s father was responsible for her daughter’s lost of pure self and destruction. Tess went on and on to earn money so that she could earn money and might buy a horse for her parents. Moreover, Tess’s mother Joan Durbeyfield was foolish and selfish woman. She wanted her daughter to marry a gentleman. To fulfill that wish, she compelled her own daughter to be raped by scoundrel called Alec; where Tess worked. Tess’s mother should have listened to her daughter’s inner voice but she was blinded to her own wish and social code. Tess ruined her own life to please her parents. She said to her mother “Do what you like with me, mother.”

The last phase of her life was also instance of unbearable pain she had held for a long time; which she at last became free by stabbing Alec d’Urberville to death. She went out to seek her own true husband Angle Clare. She was him from a distance near the station. She followed him along the road and overcame him after covering a mile or so. When she met him, she told how she had stabbed Alec to death with a knife, for she could get her true husband back only by doing away with the villain. Angle Clare kissed her endlessly and held her hand as if he would never leave her. Her murder of Alec made her free from slavery of patriarchal chain.

Conclusion:

Tess paid for no fault of hers. First she was innocent. Angel deserted her because he thought that if a woman had lost her physical chastity, she would not be pure. But as soon as his outlook was changed, he realized his mistakes and came back to accept her. He blamed himself for judging her so hastily and cruelly. Secondly, if at all any fault had been done by her, the punishment would not have been just. She was too sorely tired. She came out pure. But it was too late. The woman failed to get any consolation in life. No one except death showed mercy to her. Nevertheless, she fought against the cruel attitude towards women in patriarchal society and challenged the Victorian social codes of behavior and lifestyle. Tess had long been caged in the cage of pain, melancholy and suffering of social norms and expectations of the society. At last she flew away from all these chains through her death.
Work cited:


