

Women's Language in Thomas Hardy's Fiction

Hira Ali¹, Sohail Ahmad Saeed², Hafiz Ahmad Bilal³

^{1,3}Lecturer, University of Sargodha, Pakistan

²Assistant Professor, the Islamia University of Bahawalpur. Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to analyze that how inadequate language is to express the experiences of female characters in Hardy's fiction. Women try to defy male appropriation by defining their thoughts using their own voices. According to Victorian conventions, the female protagonists are classified and labeled by the male counterparts with the use of language. These labels are challenged in Hardy's fiction by certain females who resist to be silenced until patriarchal forces overwhelm them.

KEY WORDS: Women, language, patriarchy, resistance, silence.

INTRODUCTION

Victorian society, as presented in the fiction of contemporary authors, was governed by various behavioral and ethical codes for women. Contemporary society maintained men at the center of communal life while women at the margin of social world. In the nineteenth century it was the women who became the victim of patriarchal rules of the society which lead to their exploitation outside the domestic sphere of life. Women were rarely expected to take part in any social work or any work of discovery and exploration. Her place in the society was defined by men. They were not permitted to find any role beyond being a caring mother or a chaste wife.

During the contemporary age women recognized their importance and felt a need to redefine their social position. In the late 1870s, females of the Victorian culture began a campaign for the sake of social, economic and political equality in the society. However, the *New Woman* was yielded to be an educated and experienced person living her life independently. In many literary presentations of the contemporary age the *New Woman* had to suffer from the neurotic disorders due to their inability to fight the deeply rooted conventional values of the social order (Cunningham 49-50).

By the end of the nineteenth era a feminist movement was spreading which soon became established. It declares that women are a distinct group oppressed by the patriarchal social order (Donovan xi). Feminists questioned the position of women in relation to men in society and relation of both the genders to the language. Kauffman views that feminists analyze the "power relations amongst the gender" (183) in the world that refutes a woman an experience outside of which was recognized by the patriarchal stereotypes.

In *Far From the Madding Crowd*, *Jude the Obscure* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* the patriarchal social order is dominant. Hardy's work denies the biological difference in male and female and expects women to be submissive or passive recipients of the men's desire. The author tries to give voice to his female characters and allows them to challenge the patriarchal social order. The topic of female's sexuality is addressed while the notion of being a 'pure woman' is deconstructed. In *Jude the Obscure* the disciplinary nature of marriage is explored by questioning Sue about her obligation of being sexually responsive to men. Hardy poses the question of marriage, love, sexual inexperience and pragmatism using the voices of women. His female protagonists questions the power of patriarchal language and despotism of women's sexuality. These women try to explore their limitations but they are ultimately silenced by the conventional social order. However, their final silence is not futile as Hardy's female protagonists contribute significantly to the feminism.

*Corresponding Author: Hira Ali, Lecturer, University of Sargodha, Pakistan, Email: hiramahais15@gmail.com

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cameron Deborah highlights the pros and cons of language articulated by the females in *The Feminist Critique of Language*. The voices of Hardy's female protagonists can be understood clearly and are portrayed against sexism found in the Victorian language. To put it in the words of Deborah, language has three concerns:

The theme of exclusion from language; the theme of representation, in which the meaning of gender is constructed and the theme of behavioral differences in language, their relation to the male domination and female culture (3).

These themes are related to the discussion of Thomas Hardy's fiction because his work question the segregation of female's from male's discourse. Secondly, the process of labeling or naming the women is challenged in Hardy's novel and thirdly the behavioral differences are inscribed in the language in which both male and female have to articulate.

Homans expresses in his work *Bearing the word: Language and the Female experiences in Nineteenth Century Women's Writing* that females are excluded from the "linguistic practice" (32) because language is designed to present the experiences of men not the woman in the patriarchal social world of the Nineteenth century. In Homans opinion due to the gender female's social world and experiences are contemplated as separate from the male world of centralization. Bathsheba being a female protagonist of *Far From The Madding Crowd* is separated from her male counterpart because of her gender and she is not having the full resources of language as man would have in her position.

Spender claims in *Man-Made Language* that the woman of the Victorian society had to identify themselves with the patriarchal world. If any woman of the contemporary society tend to defy the masculine order, she is ultimately silenced by the opposite, dominating gender. Furthermore, Cunningham presents characteristics of the contemporary woman in his work *The New Women and The Victorian Novel*. In his opinion women had always been used as a source of "artistic inspiration" though often not in a positive way (19). Nervous disorder was the major disease found in the women who tended to live their life independently. Moreover, if any women tried to cross the deeply rooted patriarchal rules, she was punished by the contemporary laws. For example, Tess tried to take the law in her own hand by stabbing Alec. She was ultimately silenced by the Victorian law through execution. Similarly, Sue and Bathsheba had to face disillusionment because of the deeply rooted Victorian conventions.

Patriarchal Language

In Thomas Hardy's fiction indistinctness and the apprehension of language is obvious in the titular of novels. The title of *Far from the Madding Crowd* has affinity with Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard*. Gray's poem confers about quiet, disgruntled prospective of the rustic man residing away from "Th' Applause of list'ning Senates" (line 61) and restrained to the "cool sequester'd Vale of Life" (75). The lines of Gray's poem are important to understand Hardy's fiction:

Far From the Madding Crowd's ignoble Strife,
Their sober wishes never learned to stray;
Along the cool sequester'd Vale of Life
They kept the noiseless Tenor of their Way. (73-76)

Gray's poem depicts the men-folk of rural areas, similar to the female's heroines of Hardy, who acknowledges noiselessly the sequestered life of the Victorian social order. These lines also find alliance with Bathsheba character, she endeavors to direct her own future by rejecting to pay the toll, by performing on the horse and to be her bailiff. She does not abscond herself to be the victim of "dumb forgetfulness" (*Elegy* 85) rather she stirs up the quiet countryside.

The title of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is much argued due to the label of Tess as a 'pure woman'. This sub-title of a pure woman portrays the labeling of woman in the Victorian society and challenges the recognition of fallen woman. Tess and Angel strive with the question of Tess's purity. Angel can no more view her as a virgin or pure and because of that she does not forgive her relation with Alec. On the contrary, Tess is sardonically persuaded that Angel is the only "man on the earth who had loved her purely, and who had believed in her as pure" (*Tess* 377).

The title of *Jude the Obscure* entirely rules out Sue Bridehead from the title which shows the great obscurity as she is given much more eminence than the title of the novel suggests. Sue's elimination from the title highlights the

obscurity of her life as a Victorian woman who refuses to play the manipulating games which her counterpart Arabella could play competently. This gives Sue more sway to live as Jude's companion in the Victorian world which could only inspect her as Jude's mistress.

Hardy's use of language reflects the concerns of feminist critics. It goes beyond the examination of how woman are represented to include an investigation of language and sexism in language. According to Deborah, language has three concerns:

The theme of exclusion from language; the theme of representation, in which the meaning of gender is constructed and the theme of behavioral differences in language, their relation to the male dominance and female culture (3).

These apprehensions find relevance to Hardy's fiction as his works inquire the barring of woman from man's discourse, defying the patriarchal process of labeling. It is also apprehensive of behavioral disparities emblazoned in language in which both men and women have to commune.

Intricacy in Describing her Feelings

Far From the Madding Crowd represents the problem of a contemporary woman and her inability to articulate in the language of patriarchy. Unlike Sue, Bathsheba does not flout the values of the male dominant society in which she resides. The female protagonist struggles to reside within the narrow confines which are imposed on her by the language and the society. Although she was rebellious by nature and expects that one day she would settle as a good Victorian wife, even though at first Bathsheba has no concern in being "men's property" (FFMC 78).

However, Bathsheba is not at all prepared to accept her confined place. Her inability to conform to the roles expected by Oak as well as the folk of countryside in her employ makes Bathsheba an anomaly. She is continuously forced to take part in a power struggle with men who desire to possess her, although she is granted the right "to be her own baily if she chooses" (FFMC 158). For example, Oak corrects her work and "watches her affairs (211), "you don't hold the shears right, miss...hold [them] like this" (182) without her knowledge. Superficially Bathsheba is accepted as a woman farmer but she is not given the respect a man would have received. She is viewed as a sexual object, even by her social inferiors such as Mark who says: "Let her have rope enough. Bless her pretty face--shouldn't I like to do so-- upon her cherry lips!" (157). Bathsheba major issue is her incapability to be silent in the world which demands her to be mute.

Bathsheba's incapability to be silent as well as her ignorance of the gravity of words instigates her troubles. She abandons to take into account that the milieu of the words alters their connotation when the words intended for a "chubby-faced child" (145) are used to stern Boldwood. Being a female, Bathsheba possesses emotionality and lacks the prudence often associated with male characters. As a result, she communicates based on intuition, which makes her less considerate to the literal meanings of words. Bathsheba uses words which are more solemn than she is aware as her feminine meaning lies more in the frivolous intent of her epistle and less in the literal meaning conveyed to one who can read only the words. Her meaning is not made clear in the language alone and she finds herself in an impossible dilemma when Boldwood proves to have difficulty in "noticing tones" (FFMC 284). Indeed she is muted by the panic of doing further inadvertent harm by apologizing for what she has seen as only a "childish game of an idle minute" (258):

If she thought she scorned him, regret would add to the offence by being disbelieved; and if she thought she wanted him to woe her, it would read like additional evidence of her forwardness (168).

Bathsheba has been trapped by words that have meanings which she is not prepared to acknowledge as her own when used in contexts that she does not understand. Thus, she is left with no words to use in her own justification. As the female protagonist matures, she acknowledges the value of words. Bathsheba expresses: "it is intricate for a woman to describe her feelings in language which is primarily made by men to express theirs" (FFMC 411). Further Kate Millet asserts in *Sexual Politics* that due to the "social circumstances, male and female are really two cultures and their experiences are entirely different" (30). Therefore it can be said that male and females classification of the society places woman outer to the phallogentric culture, whereas the men are the center of Victorian social world. Furthermore, creation of language has been developed to portray the experiences of the men but not of women. According to Homans:

Language expresses dualism of presence and absence, of subject and object, organizing everything our culture considers thinkable; hitherto women cannot participate in it as subjects as effortlessly as can men because of the authoritative, pervasive way in which the feminine is ...said to be on the object's side of that dyad" (3-4). Therefore, women are excluded from the experiences of men because of their gender.

Resistance in the Voice of Women

Murray opines that as early as the writing of Bible "it is men who speaks for women and of them" (16). However, Hardy permits the women in his novels to articulate using their own voices. The gesticulation and action of female characters are eminent in his writings, though at various places in the text male characters attempt to impose the meanings on women. Bathsheba's hasty use of words demonstrates her emotional infantile behavior and unawareness of the social correctness:

Why, if I'd wanted you I shouldn't have run after you like this: 'twould have been the forwardest thing! But there was no harm in hurrying to correct a piece of false news that had been told you. (*FFMC* 77)

Therefore, one could argue that Bathsheba articulates only for herself, not for women in broad-spectrum, and there are no narratorial impositions to gainsay her. She is criticized by her inferiors due to her gender. Instead of respecting Bathsheba due to her economic power, inferiors would rather question due to the different labels associated with her being a "woman farmer".

The other feminine voices i.e. Tess and Sue dynamically defy the appropriation of the male's gawk. Tess makes herself to appear ugly she:

[Tess] tries to consign herself beyond the mastery of the male gawk...to efface the erotic pattern that has been traced upon her body by a serial of interested viewers, so that she herself no longer serves as a supporting surface for the figuration. (Silverman 24).

Tess recognizes the influence of words and reacts belligerently when Alec uses them to categorize her sloppily. Tess remarks "How can you dare to use such words! Did it never strike your mind that what every woman says some may feel?" (*TD* 74). She also observes the words of the sign-painter oppressive and endeavors to dismiss their killing influence. Furthermore, the last defiant action of Tess is assassination of Angel near the end of novel. She tries to take her fate in her own hands and tries to free herself from the male gawk.

Hardy's last heroine, Sue, is least intruded by her chronicler. She is the most to articulate amongst other female leading roles. Sue articulates about herself as well as the failings of the society which refuse to recognize the needs of those who do not fit into the prescribed moulds of the contemporary society. She resists conforming to the social rules and insists that she and Jude are not distinctive. Sue makes herself a representative for those who sense the need to survive outside the pallocentric perceptions of the social world. She prefers to be "sexless" (*JO* 202) rather than being labeled as a sexual object that Arabella is happy to be. Sue is humiliated by the marriage ceremony and decides to marry a man that she does not love and whom she finds physically repulsive. She asserts that "she wants to marry some man of high aims" (206) and yet objects to a social order that demands the submission of man to woman. She claims to be an unconventional "Ishmaelite" (191) but hastily marries Phillolston to flee from communal disgrace. Jude as well as the narrator attempts to break away from these inconsistencies in terms of Sue's womanhood.

Ultimate Silence

Silence is the only ending for those characters who are not successful to express themselves in the language of men. Hardy's women are left either in a situation that makes verbal communication difficult for them or with no words to reply to the discourse of others. For example, Bathsheba, comes to accept the notion of a Victorian female. She accepts the fact that the "only pathway to moral dignity for women is austerity, silence and endurance" (Humm 45). After expressing herself in a "clear voice" (*FFMC* 297) to her undeserving husband, she literally loses her own voice and is left with a smile. Tess's ultimate silence lies in her death which amputates her from the patriarchal framework.

Hardy's last female protagonist, Sue, is left without words. She only quotes others and rebuffs to converse about her own loss of speech.

According to Spender, the females "could not describe it from outside...except identifying itself with the masculine. The substitute is silence; the substitute is to be a muted group" (182). Although Hardy's heroines are given their own voice, their words could never be rephrased by others. But in the end all the female characters are muted by the patriarchal composition of language. Silence, an absence of communication, is all that is left for female in a male dominant world, where women themselves are defined in opposition to men's manifest presence.

Conclusion

In Hardy's fiction woman's language and its inadequacies are important issues of the feminist concerns. His female characters speak for those inarticulate masses that are unable to convey their own deepest thoughts and feelings. Unfortunately, in the Victorian cultural context, Language only mutes women because it leaves them no place to live as autonomous creatures with words to express themselves from the margins of the social order.

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