

Jude the Obscure- Unfulfilled Aims in the view of an Existentialist

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Abstract : Jude the Obscure one of Thomas Hardy's controversial novel talks about the unfulfilled dreams of the protagonist. This paper aims in highlighting the fallen nature of man. The choice of the protagonist is responsible for his failure. Absurdity of life is well revealed through life and death of the protagonist. The innate weakness of the protagonist is analysed in the view of an existentialist. The real human predicament of life is well observed in the novel through the conflicts in human life and this paper attempts to view the irrational world through the eyes of an individual who tries to make it rational.

IndexTerms - Fear, guilt, absurdity, existentialism and conflict.

Jude the Obscure is yet another milestone in defining the ways of an individual. It is the grimmest of Thomas Hardy's tragedies. It deals with the modern themes of failure, frustration, disharmony and isolation as inescapable conditions of life. In the works of Richard Carpenter "The last novel Hardy wrote is also its most modern, turning away as it does from agricultural setting and pastoral with to a restless world of cities and psychological insecurities" (138). It is a tragedy of 'unfulfilled aims'. It is Jude's search "the presence of signified, a fixed meaning in life" (Garson 153). Jude is also a victim to his impulses. Hardy has aggressively discussed the issues of love, marriage and sex in an outraging manner. Feeling that he is in an age that needed some repair and reform on the socialistic conventional views of the society Hardy has written this novel highlighting the modern world's psychological insecurities and the harsh city life.

This novel has been Hardy's new attempt of discussing issues in a striking manner as Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* who owes so much to Hardy in expressing the ideas of sexual natures of man and woman related with marriage. The hero of the story is Jude Fawley, a south – Wessex villager. The novel is about the suffering of a man who thinks himself worthless and useless since the drowning of his mother and death of his father. Being made an orphan he is considered to be the same to his Aunt Drusilla and later to Arabella and Sue. The sympathy towards his unsecured life is reflected when he feels mercy for a set of birds. It highlights his sickening feeling towards creatures that treat cruelly another. The criticism is that Jude and Sue do not have a family to support them and they hence do not know the importance of family. Jude has intellectual aspirations but they are never fulfilled because of a sensuous temperament and the play of circumstances. Jude wants to be a scholar but he is entangled in a love affair with Arabella, "a mere female animal" (Jude the Obscure will be quoted as JO 46) and is compelled to marry her. She leaves him and he starts his studies again and wants to become a priest. But this time he falls in love with his cousin, Sue a lively intelligent young school teacher. But she marries an elderly school master Phillotson. Disappointed, bitter and unhappy, Jude takes to drinking and dies miserably.

One of Jude's great ambitions in life is to become a scholar. Another important dream of his life is to become a Reverend Father in the church. All his dreams are shattered by two women of opposite nature the sensuous Arabella and the fastidious Sue. Jude is entangled in a love affair with Arabella because of his sensuous temperament and he is also entrapped into marrying her. A woman of vulgar designs, Arabella tricks Jude into a marriage by falsely asserting that she is pregnant. Arabella frustrates his efforts to make himself a scholar. "It is a complete smashing up of my plans ... Dreams about books and degrees and impossible scholarships and all that" (70). Arabella overwhelms him with her physical charms and voluptuousness and Jude just cannot resist it. In the words of Sengupta in *Thomas Hardy : The Novelist of Tragic Vision*,

Arabella is the gross symbol of sex in contradistinction to Sue who is cold and sexless. In the form of Arabella, the power of sex runs through the whole book from her first deliberate seduction of a grave and artistic youth... to Jude's futile attempt at suicide. (167).

He has completely forgotten his studies. His weakness for a woman proves to be a hindrance to his academic progress. Soon Jude finds that there is no argument between their tastes and priorities and Arabella leaves him on the pretext of visiting her parents Jude is shocked. Sengupta again remarks "With such divergent natures, Jude the day dreamer Arabella, the realist the marriage goes to the rocks very soon" (149). It does not take Jude long to realize that,

their lives were ruined, by the fundamental error of their matrimonial union that of having based a permanent contract on a temporary feeling which had no necessary connection with affinities that alone render a life - long comradeship tolerable.(85)

Jude resumes his studies. But he now falls in love with his cousin Sue Bridehead, an intelligent young school teacher. Though he is disappointed in his love affair with Arabella, he is not cautious in his approach to women. He develops intimate relationship with the lovely Sue. That is because of his deep seated desire for sexual and emotional relationship with a lady. Though he has come to pursue the path of learning, his susceptibility to women remains. Hardy himself admits it when he calls him “a ridiculously affectionate fellow” (JO 105). His desire to become a priest becomes thwarted in the same manner as his aspiration to become a scholar. The human impulse is more powerful in him than the divine one. Sue marries an elderly schoolmaster, Phillotson. But Jude loves her secretly. Disappointed in her marriage with Phillotson, Sue comes back to Jude. Jude marries her without any pricks of conscience. Sue with her typical feminine intuition is able to see through Jude’s weaknesses of character,”You are Joseph the dreamer of dreams, Dear Jude, And a Tragic Don Quixote, and sometimes you are St. Stephen who, while they were stoning him who would see heaven opened ! Oh. My poor friend and comrade, you will suffer yet” (JO 254).

Jude pursues Sue both before and after her marriage with Phillotson. There is a constant internal warfare between flesh and spirit. His living with Sue is not approved by society. The death of their children causes a moral setback in Sue and she goes back to her former husband Phillotson. Jude’s second marriage with Sue is broken. He has been very depressed after losing Sue. But this depression has not enabled him to develop a philosophical detachment. On the contrary he once again allows himself to be trapped by the clever Arabella and remarries her under the adverse influence of liquor. But he is not able to derive any kind of happiness deserted by Sue, he becomes broken hearted and sick. In spite of his illness, he desires to see Sue for the last time and travels to Marygreen and meets her in the church. His health further deteriorates and Arabella too deserts him. She is so heartless that she leaves him alone at home and Jude dies uncared for. His sensuality is responsible for his failure in realising his aims. Jude falls victim to his own sensuality. In the words of Richard Carpenter,

Jude’s problems, has he himself admits are not entirely of society’s making , just as his story is not entirely a social tract. His character accounts for the bulk of his difficulties and provides the motive force for the events in the novel” he continues to say “Jude is pulled this way and that by desires, weaknesses and misfortunes until he comes to be like a bewildered bear in the pit of his own emotion .(143-45)

He admits that his weakness for women and addiction to liquor are responsible for his ruin. His first aspiration for academic pursuits is spoiled by Arabella and his second aspiration for priesthood is destroyed by Sue. The blame may be shared by fate and a hostile society. But it is his sensual temperament that is mainly responsible for his fall. In a war between flesh and spirit, the cravings of the flesh gains mastery over him and he forgets his literary pursuits. Jude cannot subdue the flame of passion kindled in his heart by Arabella and Sue. Even after Arabella has left him, he does not retrace his steps. Again he falls in love with Sue and finds fresh attractions in her. He cannot control the intensity of his sexual passions and so his failure and frustration could not be prevented. Sengupta says that “*Jude the Obscure* is a dual tragedy. It is Jude’s tragedy as well as Sue’s” (JO 157). Albert Gueard in *Thomas Hardy : The Novels and Stories* has pointed out “ Sue combines with her sexlessness and even repugnance to the gross sexual act, a very strong impulse to arouse sexual desire in men” (qtd Sengupta 157).Of course Jude is aware of his faults. Self – knowledge comes to him. Self – realization dawns on him.

I’m in a chaos of principles - grouping in the dark – acting by instinct and not after example . . . I doubt if I have anything more for my present rule of life than following inclinations, which do me and nobody else any harm and actually give pleasure to those I love best. (JO 402)

Albert Gueard in his study of Thomas Hardy points out that in *Jude the Obscure* “the tragic attitude lays the blame not on the stars but on ourselves; it sees fate in character”(152). It is seen that Hardy lays the blame on Jude’s innate weakness of character. Jude himself attributes his failures to his “impulses”, “affections”, “vices” and “inclinations”. But he never takes any efforts to control his impulses. He never acts to change his path. He continues to be a dreamer and achieves nothing. Albert Gueard rightly maintains that Jude the obscure is not tragic. When Sue goes back to Phillotson, Jude cries out “you know what a weak fellow I am. My two Arch enemies you know my weakness for woman kind and my impulse to strong liquor. Don’t abandon me to them Sue, to save your soul only” (JO 435). Here once again we are at the very core of

Jude's tragedy – a tragedy stemming from the weakness of characters. Here we see the pitiable cry of a weak man, seeking the help of a woman to save his soul too.

A character who goes out to his doom without struggling against the odds of life or without resisting the forces of evil which bring about his ruin may be pathetic but cannot be tragic. It is the heroic struggle and the passionate defiance of fate by Tess and Lear which endow them with a majesty and grandeur. We experience feeling that some one of great worth has been lost when we them destroyed. There is no such feeling aroused in *Jude the Obscure*. There is not much of a heroic struggle in Jude's life if there was to be a struggle, he should not have remarried Arabella and again he should have stayed on with Sue and defied the hostile society. He has neither the rational strength to put up a brave fight. In the battle for life, the weak man drops out. That is the case of Jude, he has been an utter failure in life: both in ambition and in love because "it is really only ever the material and subsisting life that he attains" (Dolin 221). And this how Arabella sums up his character: "Never such a tender fool as Jude is, if a woman seems in trouble and coaxes him bit. Just as he used to be about birds and things" (JO 330-31). He is so weak that he is unable to achieve his aspirations. There is great crisis indeed in both the emotional and intellectual life of Jude. But there is no great struggle, no resistance and no defiance. For his vision is blurred on account of sensuality as well as dreamy visionary attitude towards life. He just submits, succumbs and surrenders. He submits to the dictates of his heart, succumbs to temptations and surrenders to seductive charms of women and magic of liquor. There is nothing heroic about his deeds. He is caught in the clutches of a "war waged between flesh and spirit" (Orel 32). He leads a squalid life and gives up his ambitions and desires that he longed for from his childhood "The intentions as to reading, working, and learning, which he had so precisely formulated only a few minutes earlier, were suffering a curious collapse into a corner, he knew not how" (JO 41). The protagonist come to their tragic doom through a flaw in their character. Jude's sensuous temperament, Arabella's gross sexuality and Sue's immense inconsistency bring about the tragedy.

Ned Noddings confirms "evil is real and to control it we need to understand it and accept that the tendency toward it dwells in all of us"(229-230). The innate evil in man is integrated into a finite form and he denies dismissing it. Golding insists that man should behave more humanely by shedding off his evil nature to save humanity:

We need more humanity, more care, more love. There are those who expect a political system to produce that; and others who expect the love to produce the system. My own faith is that the truth of the future lies between the two and we shall behave humanly and a bit humanely, stumbling along, haphazardly generous and gallant, foolishly and meanly wise until the rape of our planet is seen to be the preposterous folly that it is (Nobel Lecture Dec 7, 1983).

Man's dreams make it difficult for him to get command of the reality and they feel hesitant in tackling with the contingencies of the vast world. The world contradicts man's dreams and makes it arduous to become conscious of his dreams. Absurdity another essential element in existentialist theory comes from :

the cleavage between man's aspirations to unity and the insurmountable dualism of mind and nature, between man's drive toward the eternal and the finite character of his existence, between the concern" which constitutes his very essence and the vanity of his efforts".(qtd Chen)

The slit between man's aspirations and reality originates absurdity and the 'absurdity of the world is revealed through chances in life, death, the esoteric reality, uncontrollable forces, etc. It is an attempt to view the irrational world through the eyes of an individual who tries to make it rational. Thomas Hardy deals with the real issues of mankind: Marriage, Love and Sex. Hardy seems to caution that when they are based on wrong motives, they bring about ruin. The central issue in most of the novels is sexual love, a grinding passion that sweeps men and women along despite themselves, Infidelity, illegitimacy and immorality lead to grief. So much so man misses the bliss of married life and the joy of true love. It is reflected in Tess's relations with Alec, Eustacia's relations with Wildeve, Bathsheba's relations with Troy, Jude's relations with Arabella and in the seduction of Fanny Robin. The novels portray the wrecked lives of the people. Hardy speaks out frankly on serious issues that produce a constant conflict in human life. Hardy is an objective writer. He is a keen observer of life. He interprets his observation in terms of human feelings. Everywhere he discovers the active and sovereign presence of a force in the form of a tragic flaw in man He portrays the real human predicament. His theme is mankind's predicament in the universe. Hardy's vision of life yields an account of the world and the universe we live in.

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