JETIR.ORG ISSN: 2349-5162 | ESTD Year : 2014 | Monthly Issue
JOURNAL OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES AND INNOVATIVE RESEARCH (JETIR)
An International Scholarly Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Duped yet Disparate: Fanny and Esther

Dr. Rituparna Datta Roy

Associate Professor, P .G. Dept. of English, Kanya Maha Vidyalaya, Jalandhar, Punjab

Abstract

The nineteenth- century Victorian England put a very high premium on women's morality and chastity. Any "deviation'' from the accepted "code of conduct'' was dealt with utmost severity. Following the social norm, the contemporary novels usually showed the "fallen" women as dead at the end of the story, to keep the society "pure" by weeding out these "impure creatures". Thus Thomas Hardy "killed" Fanny Robin in his novel, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, in 1874. Times changed, and, twenty years later, in *Esther Waters*, George Moore showed both Esther and her illegitimate son, Jack, to be alive and thriving.

Keywords

Victorian England, Chastity, Deviation, Severity, Social Norms, "Fallen" Women.

Far from the Madding Crowd (henceforth referred to as *FFMC*) was Thomas Hardy's first major work, which obtained both critical acclaim and huge popularity, enabling him to give up his professional career as an architect for full-time writing (Millgate 245) . It was also the first novel to use the term "Wessex", which is, according to F. B. Pinion, " a partly real, partly fictionalised dream--country setting in South--East England, centred on his own country of Dorset" (133). "Weatherbury" in the novel corresponds to the actual village of Puddletown, "Casterbridge" to Dorchester, and so on (134). The novel first appeared in 12 monthly instalments in the popular *Cornhill* magazine, from December 1873-----November 1874; and was published as a book on 23 November 1874, shortly before the last journal instalment appeared (Millgate 245). F. B. Pinion calls *FFMC* "unmistakably a major work of astonishing confidence, richness, and vitality "(137).

The title of the novel comes from Thomas Gray's famous poem, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (written in 1751), which reflects the peaceful times of humble villagers, far from the public arena (Millgate 246).

Fanny Robin in *FFMC* is a seemingly inconsequential character, a farm hand in Bathsheba Everdene's farm in Weatherbury, who appears only five times in the novel. Fanny is the unfortunate single unwed mother who dies in childbirth, and is thus "weeded away" (as per the contemporary literary convention) from a strongly moralistic, patriarchal society which could never "pardon a woman's 'slip' from the accepted moral 'code of conduct'" (Shires 176). Marjorie Garson believes Fanny "has got the word "doomed" written all over her" (135). She is impregnated, but never married by Sergeant Frank Troy. R. G. Cox calls her "the victim of Sergeant Troy" (256). However, John Goode does not show much sympathy for the unfortunate girl, but rather curtly comments that she "loses Troy because she does not appear in the right scenario in the right moment" (145). Indeed, Fanny reaches All Souls' Church instead of All Saints' Church (where Troy has been waiting for her) to get married by "mistake" (Hardy 113). This "mistake" makes Troy, seething with anger, declare point-blank that he is not to "go through that experience again for some time" (114). Marjorie Garson vehemently criticises Troy for being "entirely oblivious to the natural rhythms in what she, as a woman, is irrevocably caught" (136).

Several months later, Sergeant Frank Troy sees Fanny, by the merest chance, walking all alone to the Casterbridge warehouse, now in a state of advanced pregnancy. He realizes everything now, but, being by his time legally married to Bathsheba Everdene, all he can do is to put flowers on her tomb when the very next day Fanny dies in childbirth; and her coffin is brought to Weatherbury and buried Weatherbury churchyard. A strong rain washes the flowers away almost immediately, "as if washing Fanny and her baby out of this life and into oblivion" (Shires 148). That is all the seduced (and hence, socially ostracised) victim gets in the rigidly moralistic and heavily patriarchal Victorian society.

Hardy had genuine sympathy for such unfortunate women, (Masaka Yamaguchi calls Fanny "the author's beloved") but could not declare his anti-establishment views openly as early as in 1874. (42). He had to "employ subtextual devices in his efforts to arouse the reader's compassion for the "fallen" woman" (Boumelha 101). Thus, when he shows Fanny struggling towards Casterbridge warehouse down a country road on a moonless, starless night, with only a black stray dog as her sole company, he "refrains from identifying her by her name. By anonymizing her here, Hardy generalizes the fate of fallen women, transforming Fanny's story into a universal one applicable to all women" (102).

The moralistic and patriarchal Victorian society used to put a very high value on women's (not men's) morality and chastity, and any "fall" from the perceived notion of purity was dealt with utmost severity (109). This was faithfully reflected in contemporary literature, particularly in the second half of the nineteenth century, there was a gamut of "fallen women fiction" or "novels of seduction and abandonment" (Bough 265). Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853), Ellen Wood's *East Lynn* (1863), Wilkie Collin's *The New Magdalen* (1873), George Meredith's *Diana of the Crossways* (1885), Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles (1891),* George Moore's *Esther Waters (1894)* , Somerset Maughm's *Liza of Lambeth* (1897) are some such novels (266).

Esther Waters (henceforth referred to as *EW*) was published in 1894 in London by Walter Publishers Ltd. (Skilton i). Set in England of early 1870s, this is often considered as Moore's best novel. However, Moore himself was far from being satisfied with his work. He consistently revised and re-published it in 1899, 1917,1920, and even as late as in 1931, two years before his death (he passed away in 1933) (ii). George Orwell compares *EW* with William Somerset Maugham's masterpiece, *Of Human Bondage* (Chapman 18). Though Orwell noticed some "stylistic flaws", he extolled its "fundamental sincerity " (quoted by Chapman 19).

Scholars like Shiobhan Chapman and Annette Federico read *EW* as a story of female narrative agency. Annette Federico opines: "Esther's story offers a way to claim the rights of an individual woman to make choices, to affirm the validity of her own experiences" (15).

George Moore took "The Road Not Taken" (to borrow a phrase from Robert Frost's very popular lyric of the same title) and fallowed a forlorn land when he wrote *EW* towards the fag end of the Victorian era, in 1894. With twentieth century only six years away, he could usher in the henceforth "unfamiliar" scenario in his work. Thus he did not "kill" Esther, the seduced, but not married (and hence "fallen" woman) at the end of the novel as per the literary tradition that prevailed about two decades ago. Neither did he "kill" her illegitimate son, Jack. In a daring move, signifying the changing times, he ended the novel with both Esther and Jack well-established, she as a working woman, and he joining the national army. Not only that, Moore brought William Lach, Esther's seducer, back to her, after nearly twenty years, now sincerely repentant, who does what he should have done much ago ------- legally marry Esther. Lach accepts Jack as his biological son, displaying full faith in Esther, and gives the young man his patronymic. Such incidents must also have happened in real life, sometimes, but nobody had dared to mirror them so far in literature (Chapman 25).

Indeed, Esther comes a long way from Hetty Sorrel (the heroine of *Adam Bede* by George Eliot, 1859), who abandoned her new-born baby and let it die to escape the shame of unwed motherhood. Moore deliberately reversed Eliot's conventional treatment of the "fallen" woman, believing that "a woman's true moulding of the subject ...would be Hetty Sorrel living to save her child" (Preface to *EW,* 02). He himself chose, in sync with the changing times, to depict an unwed mother not as a hapless victim of a man's seduction, but as a confident, if not exactly proud, single mother who is determined to raise her illegitimate son against all odds. Through Esther's struggles to boldly defy the social criticisms that she faces by deciding to accept her maternal identity by keeping (and not aborting) her child, Moore offered a story that challenged the societal perception of illicit motherhood as immoral (Federico 17). Molly Youngkin argues that Esther is "a successful and unrepentant heroine", who "disentangles her individuality" from the fates of countless other unwed, single mothers "in her choice of having maternal experience" (25). In this sense, she is the predecessor of Sue Bridehead, (the heroine of Thomas Hardy's novel *Jude the Obscure*, which would appear only one year later, in 1895), who gives birth to two illegitimate babies and carries a third one, by Jude, her paramour, displaying supreme nonchalance for the society.

Moore showed "a sincere appreciation" for single working-class mothers who were at the nadir of Victorian class structure, without the support of family and society, and yet, many of them, managed to raise their children as responsible citizens (27). Thus he made Lach ultimately realise that she [Esther] "is the best woman that ever lived" (Moore 214).

Moore concluded the novel with Jack's visit to his mother at Woodview, the home of Esther's first situation and the place of Jack's (illegitimate) conception: the Barfields' family home. Youngkin argues that by presenting Jack, now a young soldier who has joined the national army, to Mrs Barfield, at the very place where he had been (illegitimately) conceived, provides "a sort of legitimacy", offering "legitimate proof" that "she had accomplished her woman's work—she had brought him up to man's estate; and that was her sufficient reward" (28). *EW* thus exposes the struggle of the single, working-class mother "to legitimate the value of her hard work and self-sacrifice in the face of class prejudice" (Federico 20).

EW was banned by circulating libraries for its alleged immortality, but was well received by both critics and readers who considered it as Moore's most successful novel (Skilton x). It was praised by the then Prime Minister William Gladstone in *The Westminster Gazette*, and soon afterwards, it became a best-seller, and was translated into several languages during Moore's life time (xi). James Joyce called EW "the best novel of modern English life" that realistically portrays a lower class heroine who defies the Victorian myth of female fallenness, and becomes a happy, self-reliant, unrepentant single mother (xii). The penultimate years of Victorian England registered a tectonic shift as far as female morality was concerned ------- Moore kept Esther alive, and Hardy called Tess, the seduced heroine of his novel, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, which was also published in 1894, "A Pure Woman".

WORKS CITED

1. Bough, A.C. *A Literary History of England*. Appleton Century-Crofts, 1948. Print.

2. Boumelha, Penny. *Thomas Hardy and Women: Sexual Ideology and Narrative Form*. Brighton Press, 1978. Print.

3. Chapman, Shiobhan. "From their Point of View: Voice and Speech in George Moore's *Esther Waters*." journals.sagepub.com. Web. 21.09.2018.

4. Cox. R.G. *Thomas Hardy: The Critical Heritage*. Duckworth, 1971. Print.

5. Federico, Annette. "Subjectivity and Storytelling in George Moore's *Esther Waters*." https://muse.jhu.edu. Web. 20.09.2018.

6. Garson, Marjorie. *Thomas Hardy's Fables of Integrity: Language, Body, Text*. Oxford University Press, 2005. Print.

7. Goode, John. *Thomas Hardy: The Offensive Truth*. Routledge, 1998. Print.

8. Hardy, Thomas. *Far from the Madding Crowd*. UBSPD Publishers, 2014. Print.

9. Millgate, Michael. *Thomas Hardy: A Biography Revisited.* Oxford University Press, 2004. Print.

10. Moore, George. *A Communication to my Friends*. Quoted by Skilton, David. Introduction to the 1999 edition of George Moore's *Esther Waters*." Macmillan, 1999. Print.

11. Page, Norman. *Thomas Hardy.* Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977. Print.

12. Pinion, F.B. *Thomas Hardy: Art and Thought.* Rowman Littlefield, 1978. Print.

13. Shires, Linda M. *Re-Writing the Victorians: Theory, History, and the Politics of Gender.* Athlone Press, 2008. Print.

14. Skilton, David. Introduction to the 1999 edition of George Moore's *Esther Waters*." Macmillan, 1999. Print.

15.Yamaguchi, Masaki. "Fanny Robin's Role in *Far from the Madding Crowd."* https://hdl.handl.enet/10236/14542. Web. 20.09.2018.

16**.** Youngkin, Molly. "George Moore's Quest for Canonisation and *Esther Waters* as Female Helpmate". https://muse.jhu.edu. Web. 20.09.2018.