



WOMEN AS SUBALTERN FIGURE IN THOMASHARDY'S SHORT STORIES THE SON'S VETO AND THE ROMANTIC ADVENTURES OF A MILKMAID

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Abstract

Thomas Hardy's short stories *The Son's Veto* and *The Romantic Adventures of a Milkmaid* offer a compelling exploration of women as subaltern figures, who are restrained due to the inflexible social hierarchies and patriarchal expectations. This research paper looks into how Thomas Hardy showcases his female protagonists Sophy and Margery as oppressed and underrepresented individuals whose desire and individualities are suppressed by societal norms. Through the lens of subaltern studies this paper will highlight how aspects like class, gender, how imbalance of power affects their lives, showcasing them as voiceless people who are helplessly dependent on male authority.

In both the short stories the female characters in some way or another have fallen victims to the societies rules and roles, Sophy, in *The Son's Veto* is continuously denied her agency and personal happiness, her son often dictates her life and her fate, this very representation reinforces the Victorian ideals of how a female is supposed to submit to the society's pressure and male dominance sacrificing one's own happiness. Likewise the character of Margery, in the *Romantic Adventure of a Milkmaid* although she experiences some amount of fleeting independence but ultimately falls victim to the societal pressures portraying the limitations that are put on middle class women. Through the criticism of Hardy's Work this paper aims at presenting the deep seated oppression faced by women bringing to light their struggle for self- determination. This paper argues that Hardy portrays women as subaltern and also acts as a critic on Victorian society, its gender and class inequalities.

Keywords: New women, Female agency, Social hierarchy, Subaltern studies, Oppression, Patriarchal mindset

Introduction

The Victorian age is the reign of Queen Victoria marked as a period of transformation in Britain. Victorian society is deeply intertwined with the rigid patriarchal norms which holds and regulates the society. The Victorian era was characterized by remarkable growth juxtaposed with painful inequality. Eventually, started moving from countryside to factory towns to earn livelihood, often resulting in overcrowded neighborhoods plagued by inadequate sanitation and high levels of poverty. This era is also defined with rapid industrialization, industries

growing especially in the field of textile trade. The industrial revolution coupled with unprecedented social changes, presents the climate in both optimism with progress and highlights the anxiety that has settled in society at human cost. Middle class emerged at this time. Poverty became the root cause of lack of money which leads women to participate in jobs. Due to industrialization, owners and entrepreneurs flourished but many workers faced long hours, hazardous conditions, and meager wages meanwhile women were paid less compared to men. Victorian society offers limited occupation for unmarried middle class women to earn their livelihood like governess, schoolmistresses and other minor work, seems respectable jobs for women, meanwhile manual labor & factory work are considered as a degrading job for Victorian women, although they were paid less and even faced isolation within home. Inappropriate working conditions, insufficient wages and underemployment were the trigger points to drive the numerous women in prostitution. Prostitution was the second most specific sphere of women after pure householdship and motherhood. Those who were not satisfied with this sphere, indulge themselves into prostitutes, crime, corruption and theft. The stark reality of newly developed urban life, clearly captured in Victorian literature. The Victorian age is famous for its moral codes and social etiquettes. The period shows an explosion of achievement in the field of literature, art and architecture with writers like Charles Dickens and Bronte sisters and architecture innovation influencing modern designs. Era shows improvement in public health, education and labor laws. Due to industrialization, the Victorian age touches the height of technology and other advancement. Industrialization is a shift from agrarian economy to an industrial one. The new centers of production are factories powered by steam engines. The urban boom came with challenges: overcrowded houses and many more showcases the pitfall of gloomy industrial life, and it becomes the centre of diseases like cholera.

Victorian Women

Victorian age recognized by the cult of domesticity prized by ideal women, a highest calling for the majority of Victorian women as nurturing mother, devoted wives and a moral guardian for society's sake ,however the grounded love for family seems like a forced entity on them . Victorian women were merely a fashionable object of the Victorian age to showcase; society built them as a showcase not as an individual with personal choices and will of their own. They remain tangled in the strict norms constructed for them by the authorities, to silence their voices and remain unrecognized as individuals. Victorian women not only are powerless but also they have no legal rights, society didn't even give them wings to fly. Their identity is purely and completely based on their marital status. Isolation and alienation become their companions. They have no public life as it belongs to men only. The concept of higher education is rare for them. To maintain their social status they dressed up in corsets, long skirts their dressing symbolizes femininity and their so called class. It is believed that once a woman gets married, she will become 'perfect wife'. Housewife is a best & perfect occupation for Victorian ladies. Instead of fighting for their rules, they were nurtured in a manner to take care of domestic roles, such as housework, childbirth and obey their respectful husband commands. Victorian society expected women to marry to deviate them to realize their own interest and talent. This is the only way to make them completely dependent. In the beginning of the 18th century, young girls attended School and studied and gained basic skills like writing, reading and math to prepare them for marriage; they only got educated as it would not interfere with their household work.

New women

The concept of New Women emerged in the Victorian age to showcase the independence and modernity adapted by women that challenged traditional norms imposed on women by patriarchal society. It is a transformative moment when women began to break the clutches to be free from the rigid expectations of domesticity and passive femininity that defined much of Victorian society. Traditionally, Victorian women were supposed to become the ideal of motherhood, purity, passivity and submissiveness. New women expanded their sphere from domesticity, and demanded for higher education, professional career & present their opinion publicly. Their hallmark is gaining intellectual and economic independence to stand as an individual away from the grip of patriarchy unlike the ideal women of Victorian society who prioritized their marriage and household chores ,new women advocated for financial self-sufficiency and an individual identity that did not solely define their roles as wives or mothers. New Women defied norms in fashion by adopting simpler, practical clothing (like bloomers instead of corsets), and they engaged in activities traditionally deemed inappropriate for women, like cycling or traveling alone and breaking the rigid norms

constructed for women. Their personal choices and rejection of existing stereotypes showcase to challenge the deep rooted patriarchy and to those who created the ideals for women. New woman concept, become a spark in the dull and regular life of Victorian woman. They gain courage and try to create their path to become a new woman. They eject their domestic expectations to pressure their dreams. New woman concept is a medium to explore them, and to prove themselves by their Intellectuality. New woman, pursuing a job in the field of medicine, law, journalism, which was the place dedicated to men only. They reject restrictive clothing like corset, long skirts, to showcase their social status; instead, they obtain more comfortable and practical attire. They delayed or rejected this institution of marriage in order to pursue their dreams and ambition oval traditional family roles. Unlike traditional Victorian women who remain in their home, new women embrace travelling, and gain higher education for themselves.

Subaltern studies

The concept of subaltern studies introduced by Antonio Gramsci refers to a group of marginalized and silent voices under power dynamics of society. This group includes peasants, workers, indigenous peoples, and other non-elite populations, who are often voiceless due to traditional oppression of class structure. The concept of subaltern was further developed by scholars like Gayatri Spivak, Spivak's influential essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, critically examines whether these marginalized groups can ever truly express their own histories and experiences without having their voices dominated, misinterpreted, or co-opted by the prevailing discourses of power. Spivak's work focuses on the silent voices of subaltern. A subaltern character is sidelined by the writer or by the influence of another character, being an important character of the story they become neglected in it. They act as silent characters and the decision of their life depends on another character's actions. In Shakespearean plays, women in power are treated with distrust, and they have questionable morals, even some critics mentioned that he treated women's characters with disrespect, although being a writer of the 16th century; his works reflect the essence of a modern approach.

Although the concept was introduced later, women remain subjugated and voiceless since ages. Thomas Hardy talks about women oppression and hardship faced by them in male dominated society. Women depend on their father or husband, due to lack of opportunities in various fields, they can't compete, and that's why they are incapable of any duties outside of their home. Women lost her personal rights and started to depend on others and indulge in their submissive roles. A woman should be obedient, innocent and silent servants of man, and women remain silent and in the sake of becoming ideal women, they have inherent attributes like subjugation, suppression and exploitation. Intellectual opportunities aren't made for women despite their abilities and intelligence, they were purely linked to wife and motherly duties. It is believed that their minds were capable of handling household chores. Those who follow the criteria are considered angelic ones. Society restricted their identity. Hardy short stories like 'The son's Veto' & 'The Romantic adventures of a Milkmaid'

Sophy as subaltern in The Son's Veto

Hardy introduces the character of Sophy whose personal history is marked by hardship and social limitation. She was born in a lower class and her class decided her fate and confined her desires & will under her family expectation and society. Being a woman, she faced double discrimination by society and by her family members she became an emblem of resilience and repression. The story explores the subaltern condition in which a woman is marginalized and deprived of autonomous agency. Sophy's life is defined by the choices made by men in her life. Although she married a high ranking Anglican Church official, she confined herself with a rural mind set which triggered his son and his husband.

The concept of 'veto' is a powerful metaphor; it symbolizes the denial of Sophy's rights of self determination. Hardy critique the society where despite the independence, reduced to subordinate role by familiar and social expectations. In the story class in general disparity plays a crucial role. Her journey from a working class parlor maid to an imposed highly class wife captures the essence of subalternity, the individual's true self suppressed by the weight of cultural norms & societal expectation. The fact that she is married to an upper class man, she is thrust into an environment where she reminds of her 'otherness'. Her relationship with her son Randolph also highlights the subaltern state. He overpower upon his mother's will. He is arrogant and infused with pride by his upper class status. His proper behavior, refined speech and social decorum become nothing less than veto over Sophy's personal identity.

Despite her inner desire and voice she chooses to remain silent and kill her desire - under his authority. This shows a stark portrayal of patriarchal power. This dynamic highlights that, if a woman married to upper class men still she is judged by her lower class strata. His son's behavior towards his mother shows his high class mentality. He chooses his status over his mother's desires. He decides her fate and choices and becomes blind in his upper class mindset. His own son considers her as a product of society. His mother dies with her desire and his son remains unaffected. he can't compromise his honor and dignity for his mother's lower class love .

Randolph's action symbolizes the patriarchal authority seen in the Victorian era. Randolph imposed refined speech over her mother to show his authoritative nature. Randolph's decision leads to Sophy's growing isolation and alienation. She is trapped within her thoughts, emotion and self expression which are continually marginalized. Isolation also shows the subaltern condition, where familial care is weaponries to enforce conformity and up holds external social hierarchies. Broader social system that devalues individuality in favor of rigid patriarchal norms. it isn't a personal tragedy by the inescapable nature of oppression over women. Earlier she is controlled by Mr. Twycott, her marriage with him not based on love but rather obligation. Her lower class background and physical disability further limits her ability. Her obedience leads to misery. She doesn't openly resist the dominant force which controls her life instead prefers to remain silent and kill her own desire for family happiness. Society conditions women in a manner that she chooses her family over herself. She pleases her family and fulfills her duty as a wife and a mother and neglects her own genuine emotion and feelings for Sam. Sophy's upper class status after marriage, still he lets her fall under the patriarchal authority. In male dominated world, society appreciates dependent and obedient women. Thomas Hardy's recognition as feminist novelist is deeply ambivalent. His most prominent and widely accepted work 'The son's Veto' & 'The Romantic Adventures of a Milkmaid' – reveals the harsh reality imposed on women by patriarchal norms. His female character by their situation or fate showcases the bitter reality of society which limits their agency. Hardy tries to establish a status of independent women, in Victorian society who consider women as an object to please, raise children and household chores. They are simply seen as a fancy object to present.

Margery as a Subaltern Figure in The Romantic Adventures of Milkmaid

Margery, a simple milkmaid, encounters mysterious foreign gentlemen. She saves him from taking his own life, and in gratitude he offers to fulfill her any desire. Margery's rural origin and limited social power restrict her desire and destiny to function openly. The idea of subaltern also resonated with Gayatri Spivak: she threw light on marginalized voices, remained silent by dominant power structure, and left them struggling to be heard or recognized. The title suggests that the character Margery encounter various adventures in the story. Margery life as a milkmaid in rural area mark her lower strata of society, a group remain traditionally voiceless & subordinate. Her inseparable link to her role as milkmaid is a constant reminder to her class. Hardy describes her class by her wearing "an unadorned smock & battered shoes", the very garment of her quotidian and humble world. It shows the weight of economic marginalization. Her profession compared her world and devoid her to enjoy upper class privilege. Her initial encounter with Baron, a foreigner gentleman, serves as a moment of escape from her constrained world. She wants to escape from her reality & experience the sophistication & luxury upper class hold by attending a Yeoman's ball. Her choices & decision majorly depends on her interaction with male figures that belong to higher authoritative class. The story overlapped somewhere with the fairytale, Cinderella. She enjoys ball night as a dream & eventually returns to her reality, pastoral life. The upper class life seems fascinating to her; she dares to step outside from her rural boundaries symbolized her eagerness in participation in 'ball'. The gentlemen encounter shows as patriarchal force to control. She somewhere directed her path & also embodied social norms to keep her inferior. Her so-called 'romantic adventure' is more about social hierarchies & less about personal liberation. She considered as inferior both by her low class status & by her gender. Her profession as milkmaid in rural area were traditionally denied agency or voice in patriarchal order. She had inherently restricted access over economic & social power. Her professional identity as a milkmaid places her not only economically undervalued but also confines her under rigid social norms. Her character displays moments of boldness -by stepping in dazzling ball parties. The path of genuine empowerment remains obstructed by societal expectation that women are guided, controlled by men.

Her encounter with men in the story from a benevolent & controlling gentleman to her local lover highlights the tension between: promise of liberation by romantic adventure by undercut reality of patriarchal norms. Rather than accepting Margery's desire and choices, her interaction

with men limits her agency. Ball serves as a gateway to new world and a temporary escape from her subalternity. During the ball scene 'Though my heart dares to dream of a life beyond the plow & pasture, these words & glances speak of a world not meant for a milkmaid like me'. The statement showcases gap between her inner desires and external realities governed by gender & class disparities. She feels alienated in the dazzling world of upper class during ball party, the world away from hardship and struggles of daily life, she remains constrained by her background. Her adventure leads her to disappointment after attending a luxury ball she finds herself dissatisfied with her betrothed James. Although she returned to her original station reinforces rigid social hierarchy. She questions her decision, which was initially based purely by her class, despite experiencing the luxury of an aristocratic lifestyle she remains an outsider. Her class and Victorian norms limit her agency.

Conclusion

The exploration of women as subaltern figures in Thomas Hardy's underscores the rigid nature of patriarchal control in rural society. By textual analysis, it becomes evident that Hardy constructs his female characters not merely as a passive receiver of their circumstances but as individuals whose lives are constantly negotiated within cultural & social framework. In the Son's Veto captures the power dynamics within familial structures, showcase the silenced female voices as a symbol of subordination. Meanwhile in, The Romantic Adventures of a Milkmaid delves into the tension between romantic desires & social restrictions, highlights how cultural expectation dissolves the possibility of personal autonomy.

The narratives reinforce a critical commentary, a structure that confines women, by familial & economic imperatives to enforce subaltern status. Hardy's portrayal of women characters faced challenges enduring impact of traditional gender roles & interplay between personal desires & social obligation.

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