



Exploring Societal Constraints: Astha and Tess as Representations of Women in Two Cultures

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ABSTRACT

The present research paper undertakes a comparative study of Astha from *A Married Woman* and Tess from *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* to explore how societal structures shape women's identities across different cultural contexts. Despite belonging to distinct socio-historical backgrounds—modern postcolonial India and Victorian England—both protagonists represent the universal struggle of women against patriarchal norms, gender expectations, and moral double standards. Through their experiences of marriage, sexuality, autonomy, and resistance, Astha and Tess reveal how societal institutions such as family, religion, and morality regulate women's lives. The study investigates the negotiation of agency, the internalisation of gender roles, and the emergence of selfhood in the face of oppressive structures.

While Tess emerges as a tragic victim of rigid Victorian morality, Astha reflects the dilemmas of the modern Indian woman negotiating between tradition and self-expression. The paper adopts a feminist and comparative framework to analyse how these characters articulate resistance in different forms. It also examines the intersections of class, sexuality, and cultural expectations. Ultimately, the study argues that both characters symbolise the persistence of patriarchal control across cultures, but they also reveal changing modes of female resistance and identity formation. Thus, this comparative approach highlights the continuity of women's struggles and the evolution of feminist consciousness across time and geography.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Identity, Feminism, Culture, Marriage, Agency

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature across cultures has consistently reflected the struggles of women within patriarchal societies. Feminist criticism has revealed how gender roles, social norms, and institutional structures influence women's lives and limit their autonomy. The representation of women in different literary traditions enables scholars to examine both cultural specificity and universal patterns of oppression. This study focuses on two important female protagonists: Astha in *A Married Woman* and Tess in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.

Tess, a rural girl in Victorian England, becomes a victim of rigid moral codes and social hypocrisy. She is judged harshly for circumstances beyond her control, especially sexual violence and class disadvantage. Hardy

exposes the artificial nature of social morality and the unequal burden placed upon women. Tess's tragedy lies not only in her suffering but also in society's refusal to recognise her innocence. Victorian ideology often equated female virtue with sexual purity, thereby reducing women to moral symbols rather than individuals.

Astha, on the other hand, represents the dilemmas of the modern Indian woman caught between tradition and modernity. She struggles with marriage, sexuality, financial dependence, and emotional fulfilment. Kapur portrays the internal conflicts of middle-class Indian women who attempt to negotiate autonomy while remaining embedded in social structures. Astha's journey reflects both resistance and compromise.

This comparative study explores how these two characters represent the continuity of patriarchal oppression across cultures while also highlighting differences in historical context and modes of resistance. By examining their experiences, the paper contributes to feminist literary discourse and cross-cultural gender studies.

2. RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVE

The rationale of this study lies in the need to explore women's representation in diverse cultural and historical contexts to understand the persistence and transformation of patriarchal structures. Although Thomas Hardy and Manju Kapur belong to different literary traditions, both address the constraints imposed on women's lives. Comparative analysis provides a broader perspective on gender, identity, and social norms.

The objectives of this study are:

1. To analyse how patriarchal institutions shape the lives of Astha and Tess.
2. To examine the role of marriage, sexuality, and morality in defining women's identities.
3. To explore the negotiation of agency and resistance in different cultural settings.
4. To identify similarities and differences in the representation of women in Victorian and postcolonial contexts.
5. To contribute to feminist comparative literary studies by highlighting cross-cultural gender concerns.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Feminist critics have extensively discussed Hardy's portrayal of women. Scholars argue that Tess represents a critique of Victorian moral hypocrisy. Critics highlight Hardy's sympathy toward Tess and his rejection of conventional morality. Tess's suffering exposes the injustice of judging women by rigid sexual norms. As Hardy suggests, Tess is "more sinned against than sinning" (307).

Similarly, feminist scholars view Kapur's Astha as a representation of the modern Indian woman negotiating identity within domestic and social spaces. Astha's struggle for autonomy, emotional fulfilment, and financial independence reflects broader gender issues in postcolonial India. Scholars emphasise her gradual realisation that selfhood requires both economic and emotional agency.

Comparative feminist studies emphasise the universality of patriarchal control. Critics argue that despite cultural differences, women across societies face similar constraints, such as control over sexuality, marriage expectations, and economic dependence. Astha and Tess both internalise social norms before resisting them.

However, there is limited research comparing these two characters. Most studies focus separately on Victorian and Indian feminist texts. This study attempts to bridge this gap by analysing the cross-cultural dimensions of gender oppression and resistance.

4. METHODOLOGY / RESEARCH DESIGN

The study adopts a qualitative, comparative, and feminist approach. Primary texts include *A Married Woman* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Close textual analysis is used to examine themes of patriarchy, marriage, sexuality, and identity.

The research framework draws upon feminist theory and comparative literature. Concepts such as gender construction, agency, and resistance guide the analysis. Secondary sources, including feminist criticism, cultural studies, and gender theory, support interpretation. The study also considers historical and socio-cultural contexts to highlight similarities and differences in the representation of women.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Patriarchal Structures and Social Conditioning

Patriarchal ideology shapes both Tess and Astha from childhood. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Tess's mother reinforces the idea that marriage is a woman's primary destiny. Mrs. Durbeyfield urges Tess to claim kinship with the wealthy d'Urbervilles for social advancement (34). Tess internalises this expectation despite her reluctance, demonstrating how patriarchal values are transmitted within the family. Hardy emphasises Tess's moral innocence but social vulnerability when he describes her as "a mere vessel of emotion untinged by experience" (58).

Similarly, in *A Married Woman*, Astha grows up in a conservative middle-class household where obedience and domesticity are emphasised. Kapur writes that Astha "had been trained to adjust" (41). The phrase suggests internalised compliance rather than overt coercion. Her upbringing conditions her to equate marriage with fulfilment. Later, she reflects that her life had been structured around "small, manageable expectations" (76).

Both protagonists reveal how patriarchy operates through subtle normalisation. Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (283) becomes relevant here, as both Tess and Astha are socially constructed into gendered roles.

5.2 Class, Economic Dependency, and Gender Inequality

Tess's vulnerability is intensified by poverty. Hardy underscores this when he notes that "the family fortunes were dependent upon the chances of the youngest daughter" (Hardy, 52). Tess becomes a sacrificial figure for familial survival. Alec's economic superiority enables his exploitation, demonstrating the intersection of class and gender.

After her seduction/assault, Tess is burdened by social stigma while Alec remains unpunished. Hardy critiques this imbalance: “The woman pays” (121). The concise statement reflects structural injustice. Tess’s economic limitations leave her few alternatives, compelling her into agricultural labor at Talbothays and Flintcomb-Ash (204).

Astha’s situation differs in class position but reflects similar dependency. Hemant controls finances, reinforcing patriarchal authority. Kapur observes that Astha “had no money of her own” (Kapur,69). This economic dependence mirrors Tess’s vulnerability, albeit in a more subtle domestic context. Astha’s eventual pursuit of financial independence reflects a conscious feminist awakening: “She valued independence, in money and in thought” (112).

Thus, both texts reveal that economic structures sustain patriarchal power.

5.3 Marriage and Domesticity as Sites of Control

Marriage, as depicted in both Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and Manju Kapur’s *A Married Woman*, operates as a crucial mechanism for the regulation and control of women’s identities, aspirations, and autonomy. In Hardy’s narrative, Tess is subjected to the Victorian idealisation of female purity and virtue. Angel Clare, who initially worships Tess for her innocence, dramatically alters his perception following her confession of past trauma. He declares, “You are one person; now you are another” (Hardy, 239), a statement that starkly illustrates the conditional and patriarchal nature of acceptance within marriage. The fact that Angel, despite his own confessed transgressions, cannot extend forgiveness to Tess (244) exposes the gendered double standards prevalent in Victorian society. Hardy’s narrator reinforces this critique by asserting that Tess is “more sinned against than sinning” (307), highlighting the inherent injustice women face when marriage becomes a tool for enforcing societal morality and patriarchal dominance.

In contrast, Manju Kapur’s *A Married Woman* situates marriage within the context of contemporary Indian middle-class society. Astha’s union with Hemant is marked not by overt scandal, but by a subtler, insidious emotional alienation. Kapur poignantly captures Astha’s sense of erasure, “She felt invisible in her own house” (93). The domestic sphere, idealised as a site of comfort and belonging, becomes instead a space that restricts and diminishes her. Hemant’s assumption of authority in household decisions (87) reinforces the traditional gender hierarchy, relegating Astha to the role of an obedient wife and mother, expected to find fulfilment solely through domestic routines. The monotony and lack of agency experienced by Astha reflect the persistent power structures that undergird marriage as an institution.

Both novels, despite their differing cultural settings, underscore marriage and domesticity as sites where patriarchal control is enacted and maintained. Tess’s tragic fate following the failure of her marriage points to the destructive potential of such constraints, as societal judgment ultimately leads to her downfall. Conversely, Astha’s journey is characterised by a gradual questioning of the “myth of marital fulfilment.” While she does not abandon her marriage, her inner dissatisfaction leads her to seek meaning and identity beyond the domestic sphere.

5.4 Sexuality, Desire, and Moral Policing

Sexuality and desire stand at the heart of both *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *A Married Woman*, with both texts exploring how society polices and disciplines women's bodies and desires. In Hardy's Victorian England, Tess's sexuality is not her own; it is a subject of constant scrutiny and moral judgment. After her encounter with Alec d'Urberville, Tess is cast out of the realm of purity and becomes a target for communal condemnation. Hardy's critique of this relentless moral policing is encapsulated in his reference to the "President of the Immortals" who sports with human suffering (397), a phrase that suggests not only divine indifference but also a societal complicity in perpetuating female suffering. Tess internalises the shame imposed upon her, despite her innocence and lack of agency in her victimisation. Her confession to Angel—"I was a child when it happened" (241)—emphasises her lack of consent, yet this utterance does nothing to shield her from the harsh verdict of society or her husband. For Tess, desire is never a choice but an identity imposed upon her, defined by patriarchal values that equate womanhood with chastity and virtue.

This policing of female sexuality is deeply rooted in Victorian ideology. As feminist critic Elaine Showalter notes, nineteenth-century women were often judged solely by their sexual virtue, and any deviation from this standard resulted in social ostracism and personal tragedy (125). Tess's story becomes a powerful illustration of these oppressive norms, as her life is irreparably altered by the moral gaze of her surroundings.

In contrast, Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* offers a depiction of sexuality that reflects both change and continuity. Astha's relationship with Pipeel represents a modern, self-directed exploration of desire and intimacy. Kapur writes that Astha felt "alive in a way she had never known" (178), signalling a liberation and awakening that stands in stark contrast to Tess's traumatic sexual experience. However, this newfound agency does not exempt Astha from the pressures of moral surveillance. Her anxiety over "discovery" (182) reveals that, despite societal advances, women's sexuality remains a contested terrain subject to scrutiny and discipline.

The key difference lies in agency: while Tess's sexuality is imposed upon her, resulting in victimhood and shame, Astha's is consciously chosen, reflecting a shift toward self-assertion. Yet, the fear and guilt Astha experiences highlight the persistence of moral policing, suggesting that, across cultures and centuries, women's desires are still constrained by social expectations. Both narratives thus expose how sexuality becomes a battleground for control, reflecting broader struggles over female autonomy and dignity.

5.5 Resistance, Rebellion, and Feminist Agency

Tess demonstrates moral resistance when she rejects Alec's financial support: "I will not come to you!" (Hardy, 318). Her refusal reflects ethical strength. Her final act of violence against Alec (384) symbolizes desperate rebellion against sustained oppression. Though tragic, her resistance asserts agency.

Astha's resistance is gradual. She engages in social activism during communal tensions and develops intellectual independence. Kapur observes that Astha "began to think for herself" (134). Her assertion of economic independence further marks transformation.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity suggests that resistance emerges through the disruption of norms (Butler, 1990, 179). Astha disrupts normative expectations through her emotional and intellectual autonomy.

Thus, Tess's rebellion is radical and fatal; Astha's is transformative and ongoing.

5.6 Identity Formation and Psychological Conflict

Tess's identity is fragmented by social condemnation. Hardy describes her as "a figure of Guilt intruding into the haunts of Innocence" (233). This imagery reflects psychological alienation. She struggles to reconcile personal integrity with external judgment.

Astha's psychological conflict is internal rather than socially visible. She reflects on her dissatisfaction: "Something was missing" (Kapur, 101). Her gradual self-awareness aligns with modern feminist identity formation.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that women writers often depict female identity as divided between compliance and rebellion (76). Both Tess and Astha embody this duality.

5.7 Cultural Specificity and Universality

Victorian England's rigid moral codes contrast with India's transitional modernity. Yet both societies regulate female behaviour. Hardy critiques industrial modernity and moral rigidity (210). Kapur critiques middle-class conservatism despite modernisation (145).

Gayatri Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?" (271) resonates with Tess's silenced suffering. Astha, however, begins to articulate her desires, suggesting historical progress.

Thus, cultural differences exist, but patriarchal control remains universal.

5.8 Intersectionality: Gender, Class, and Culture

Tess's lower-class identity intensifies her vulnerability. Hardy highlights agricultural exploitation at Flintcomb-Ash (326). Her labour reflects intersectional oppression.

Astha's middle-class respectability creates psychological pressure rather than physical hardship. She must preserve social image while negotiating desire (Kapur, 156).

Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality (149) clarifies how gender interacts with class and culture in shaping women's experiences.

5.9 Evolution of Feminist Consciousness

Hardy's sympathetic portrayal anticipates feminist critique. Tess's narrative exposes systemic injustice but offers limited hope.

Kapur, writing in post-independence India, presents expanded possibilities. Astha's narrative reflects second-wave feminist ideas of autonomy and selfhood.

From Tess's tragic silence to Astha's evolving voice, feminist consciousness shifts from exposure of oppression to negotiation of empowerment.

6. FINDINGS

The study reveals that Astha and Tess represent women's struggles across cultures and historical periods. Both characters experience patriarchal control through family, marriage, and moral norms. Their lives demonstrate how gender roles limit autonomy and shape identity.

However, significant differences emerge. Tess is a tragic victim of rigid Victorian morality, while Astha represents the modern woman negotiating autonomy. Tess's resistance is radical but leads to destruction, whereas Astha's is gradual and transformative.

The study also highlights the role of sexuality in controlling women. Both characters challenge double standards, but their outcomes differ due to cultural and historical contexts. Ultimately, the research demonstrates the universality of patriarchal oppression alongside evolving feminist resistance.

7. CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of Astha and Tess reveals the continuity of women's struggles across cultures while highlighting significant historical transformations. Both characters represent the impact of patriarchal structures on women's identities, relationships, and life choices. Through their experiences, Hardy and Kapur expose the injustice of gendered moral codes and the limitations imposed by social expectations.

Tess's life reflects the rigid moral and social structures of Victorian England. Her tragedy lies in society's refusal to acknowledge her innocence and humanity. Hardy critiques the double standards that judge women more harshly than men. Tess becomes a symbol of resistance against social hypocrisy, even though her rebellion leads to destruction.

Astha, in contrast, represents the dilemmas of the modern Indian woman. Her journey reflects the negotiation of identity within a changing society. Unlike Tess, Astha does not reject society but seeks to redefine her place within it. Her gradual self-realisation and search for independence reflect contemporary feminist thought.

The comparison also demonstrates the evolution of feminist consciousness. While Tess's resistance is tragic and isolated, Astha's reflects collective and social change. The shift from victimhood to negotiation indicates progress in women's status. However, the persistence of patriarchal control suggests that gender inequality remains a global issue.

Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of comparative feminist analysis. By examining literary representations across cultures, scholars can better understand the universality and diversity of women's experiences. Astha and Tess symbolize both continuity and change in the struggle for autonomy, dignity, and identity. Their stories remain relevant in contemporary discussions of gender, culture, and social justice.

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