

## **A Study of the Persistence of Individuality in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles***

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**ABSTRACT:** "*Tess of the D'Urbervilles*" is a striking one among Hardy's novels for its delineation of the notion of individuality or strong individual character. The social setting and the tragic happenings which occur therein in the novel are the grounds against the backdrop of which the narrative of the birth and development of an individual self takes place. However, the protagonists or the characters' bouts of suffering and sacrifice, incidentally, lead them to seek for themselves choices and self-knowledge that in turn would guarantee the functionalist state of a society and social solidarity among the members of the society. In other words, the strong sense of individuality as gained by the protagonists and as occasioned by their tragic sufferings in the novel is only meant to be lost for the cause of the order of the existing society of the period. This paper would make an attempt to explore the reasons and the factors which go into making such a scheme or a pattern in the novel.

**Keywords:** functionalist state of the society, individuality, self, social solidarity

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### **I. Introduction**

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) was a distinguished novelist, short-story writer and poet of the nineteenth and early twentieth century England. He belongs to the last generation of Victorian writers. As such, his works bear witness to the happenings and changes which occurred in Victorian society in a state of transition to modern times. Hardy's keen observation of human beings and nature, and his meticulous delineation of the intricacies and intrigues involved in the affairs of human beings merit critical appreciation from the critics and other writers, and his writings have indeed met with a great deal of such appreciation and attention. Eschewing the school of literary criticism centering on fate and fatalism, destiny and divinity in Hardy's novels, this paper seeks to investigate the role and essence of individual and individuality, social solidarity and conformity in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy. The birth and growth of the concept of individuality and the individual informed by the developments in the socio-political thoughts and changes are thematically articulated in Hardy's novels.

Thomas Hardy wrote fourteen novels and a considerable number of short-stories, poems and other literary pieces. He is known for his incisive delineation and description of the social and moral plight of the characters and their struggle against the oddities of life. The tragic occurrences and mishaps as occasioned by the changing world of nineteenth century England reveal the ill luck or fate of the characters. However, thoughts concerning human behavioural qualities and the notion of determining one's own individual character in the face of harsh realities of time and society, also come to the fore as a positive emphasis on strong individuality on the part of the characters in the novels. Repudiation of self-imposed ignorance of knowledge of self and confirmation of practical existence in itself in the light of the experience and wisdom gathered from the sad occurrences of their lives teach them the importance of the individual's essential being. The governing materialist conditions and economic determinants depicted in the novel steer them in the direction of the formation or non-formation of individuality. The poor economic conditions of the working-folks or villagers in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* hardly enable them to see for themselves the actual condition of their lives. The meaningfulness of their existence lies in sharing in the bonds of solidarity binding the other members of the community, and when they do, they become party to the social order and integration as prevalent in the society. While the development of a strong sense of individuality and selfhood was very much apparent in such a conflict ridden society, the loss of the same in yielding itself to the functionalist notion and nature of the society is also a verity to be considered. It ought to be mentioned that the character called Tess in this novel, while revolting against the social injustice and inequitable access to equal justice, submits herself to the prevailing social and moral order of the society of the period. The individuals merge themselves with the ordinary hordes of the rustic folk in the direction of nurturing a semblance of conventional social order and restraint.

## **II. Individuality, its Different Forms and the Society**

John Stuart Mill's celebrated chapter on the topic of individuality in his *On Liberty* suggests that individuality can be identified with self-determination: the individual is to be free, short of causing injury to others, to lead his life according to his own plan. In many other cases, self-determination is contrasted with determination by others, with allowing one's plan of life to be determined by custom, popular opinion, the tastes and beliefs of the majority. But Mill believes that there are a few who have the power to withstand these social pressures on them and to shape their lives in original ways, and therefore is of the view that the cultivation of individuality is the cultivation of 'genius', i.e. of a creative elite [1]. J.S. Mill, instead of holding a utilitarian theory of individuality whereby the individual should be free to determine which way of life would maximize his own happiness or pleasure, is at one with von Humboldt in this instance. He says:

The end of man or that which is prescribed by the eternal or immutable dictates of reason, and not suggested by vague and transient desires, is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole [2].

Individuality, for Mill, is found pre-eminently in the man of genius who breaks with the traditions of his age and leads himself and his society into entirely new paths. To cultivate one's individuality is not to blindly follow the mass but to separate oneself from the masses [3]. Individuality as meant in this paper is different from the concept of individualism in its politico-legal sense. The essential characteristics of the concept of individualism can be divided mainly into two divisions- first, as a theory of society meant to understand the forces determining the social life of man; second, as a set of political maxims, derived from those forces determining the social life of man [4]. However, in this paper the concept of individuality would include the concerns bearing relevance to practicable freedom and character-formation to the exclusion of political maxims. It is true that both the concepts of individuality and individualism make the individual their focal point of emphasis and are of the view that the human individual is of primary importance in the struggle for liberation or self-determination. The rise of capitalism as an economic system in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries emphasized the individual both as the holder of self interest and as the foundation of all legal rights. However, the rise or the gain of currency of the individualism concept may be found in the utilitarian doctrine, formulated most clearly by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), that social policy should promote the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Bentham put forward to an extreme degree the thoughts suggested by Adam Smith (1723-1790), the famous advocate of economic individualism. Adam Smith is of the opinion that the welfare of society is best served when every individual seeks his or her own advantage without reference to any overarching scheme of goodness or justice. Therefore, in the event of the rise of such extreme egalitarianism of the utilitarian position, coupled with the events of the French Revolution (1789-1799), many thinkers took to assuming critical views concerning the growth of individualism. Edmund Burke (1729-1797) was concerned that the spread of democratic equality and the breakdown of the organic social order might lead to the fragmentation of persons into atomized individuals lacking any sense of identity or place. He scorned the individual's "private stock of reason" in comparison with the wisdom of history, fearing that exclusive concerns and facilities concerning the individual may lead to the crumbling of regard for the tradition-bearers of social authority, such as the monarchy, the nobility, and the church [5]. Similarly, Karl Marx (1818-1883) believed that communal equality constituted the essential prerequisite for the flourishing of free individuals.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) speaks in favour of the trend favouring the foregrounding of the individual. He reviled the 'herd mentality' of modern mass society, which espouses conformity and mediocrity as the highest aspirations of humanity. He proposed, instead, that an individual might attain the "transvaluation of values" [6], by which he meant that one could generate authentically for one's self the unique principles that would guide oneself and oneself alone. However, he cautioned that such principles of higher order are difficult to be imposed or taught by one to another. Therefore, the individual must discover in a 'radically individualized way' those precepts that augur well the realization of his or her own valuation [7]. And with a view to experimenting the validity of this observation by Nietzsche, we may study the instances of the acts and roles as assumed by the different characters in Hardy's novels. In relation to the above observations as made in the connection of preserving the intactness of the individuality of an individual, it ought to be mentioned that the social and economic conditions of the time are equally responsible for the determination of the individuality on the part of a character. Again, it would be a relevant point to state that the social and economic conflicts reigning in the lives of the characters give rise to their sense of individuality and self-determinism. George Sorel in his book *Reflections on Violence* [8] puts forth the idea that a social system is in need of conflict if only to renew its energies and revitalize its creative forces. John Dewey, with a similar note of conviction, says 'Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates to memory. It shocks us out of sleep like passivity, and sets us at noting and contriving.... Conflict is a *sine qua non* of reflection and ingenuity' [9].

The role or the function of social conflict in the process of formation of individuality can be confirmed by citing different instances and examples from the novels by Thomas Hardy. Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is

about the story of a simple country girl named Tess who hails from a small place called Marlott and who had hardly been exposed to the wiles of the world outside thus far. The girl falls prey to a trick played upon her by Alec D'Urberville who, in actual, is a member of the newly emerging rich class, and is being seduced by him. Tess bears the pain of leading a miserable life and takes to working in a farm far away from her impoverished parents where she meets another man whom she wants to marry. However, she fails to tell him about her past history till the first night after their marriage. The fear of public humiliation and estrangement which Tess feels can be attributed, in a considerable manner, to the social and economic circumstances which she needs to face. Her loss of virginity to Alec D'Urberville is occasioned by the poor economic condition in the lives of her parents and the compulsion of her going and staying with the D'Urbervilles. She does not have anyone in her life who could possibly help her deal with her struggles. Her mother, who should have been a source of help in this regard, fails to help her. After her return from the manor of her bogus kinsfolk, Tess cries to her mother saying "Oh, Mother, my Mother! ... Why didn't you tell me there was danger in men-folk? Why didn't you warn me? Ladies know what to fend hands against because they read novels that tell them of these tricks; but I never had the chance of o' learning in that way, and you did not help me!" [10]. In reply to which, surprisingly enough, Mrs. D'Urberville says "I thought if I spoke of his fond feelings and what they might lead to, you would dislike him and lose your chance." The propensity to rely upon chance governs the lives of the women-folk prior to the arrival of Tess in the scene. Tess' mother is representative of it in that she considered herself to be a fortunate one at a time when she was betrothed to her husband, Joan Durbeyfield, thinking that there could be no better option but this.

However, with the progress of time and the accumulated experience of knowing the nature of things, the human mind undergoes a change concerning the assessment of one's self and being or existence. Tess fails to avail herself of the time for novel-reading habits and thereby losing the chance of learning the tricks of defending herself against the men-folk [11]. This, in turn, leads to her seduction at the hands of Alec D'Urbervilles and birth of an illegitimate child. Importantly, all these unfortunate and tragic events occurred in the life of Tess in the direction of preparing herself to assume a new found individuality of her own. The christening of the baby all by herself, her sense of strong resistance against the danger of falling victim to rumour that was spreading around and her act of going out to the fields once again illustrate the instance of development of individuality. Incidentally enough, it was mischances and misopportunities that led to this development, and therefore they could be counted amongst blessings in disguise in this novel. In other words, it can be related as the outcome of a development which owes its origins to conflict in social mores and conventional outlook as assumed by the Victorian society thereby culminating in mischances and misopportunities. It would have been an unfortunate incident if Tess were to 'shun mankind- or rather that cold accretion called the world, which, so terrible in the mass, is so unformidable, even pitiable, in its units' [12]. However, it would be wrong to allege that the common-folk around Tess impounded her with societal obligations and made her to conduct herself in accordance to the strict rigour of societal norms. It might be true to a certain extent that there were societal pressure on Tess during her period of hibernation at Marlott after her arrival from Alec's household, but the society around her also took to showing solidarity with her sorrowful conditions. Tess' 'radically individualized way' of conducting herself in the face of such sorrowful conditions and mental trauma conferred upon her the opportunities to develop her own sense of being and it was good on her part to act so. The narrator of the novel is also of the same observation when he relates:

But this encompassment of her own characterization, based on shreds of convention, peopled by phantoms and voices antipathetic to her, was a sorry and mistaken creation of Tess's fancy- a cloud of moral hobgoblins by which she was terrified without reason. It was they that were out of harmony with the actual world, not she... Feeling herself in antagonism, she was quite in accord. She had been made to break an accepted social law, but no law known to the environment in which she fancied herself such an anomaly [13].

The tragic incidents which befall on Tess Durbeyfield lend her confidence and courage and to have a strong opinion of her being and her relevance in the eyes of the society. It is on the throes of the development of the concept of individuality that the narrator in the novel could have written that the thought of the world's concern at her situation was founded on an illusion.

She was not an existence, an experience, a passion, a structure of sensations, to anybody but herself. To all humankind besides, Tess was only a passing thought. Even to friends she was no more than a frequently passing thought. If she made herself miserable the livelong night and day, it was only this much to them- "Ah, she bears it very well". If she tried to be cheerful, to dismiss all care, to take pleasure, to take pleasure in the daylight, the flowers, the baby, she could only be this idea to them- "Ah, she bears it very well" [14].

An individual being is defined by St. Thomas as "quod est in se indivisum, ab aliis vero divisum" (a being undivided in itself but separated from other beings). It implies, therefore, unity and separateness or distinctness [15]. Individuality, in general, may be defined or described as the property or collection of properties by which

the individual possesses this unity and is separated from other beings [16]. Tess' realization of the need to emphasize her own individual existence corresponds well with the act of her being received by the village folk in the harvesting fields. It is because both the individual and the society should make amends for their respective requirements and necessities for the functioning of the society. The freedom of the individual is possible only through social relations enabling the individual to relate fully and freely to other individuals constituting the social group. 'Whatever Tess's reasoning, some spirit had induced her to dress herself up neatly as she had formerly done and come out into the fields, harvest-hands being greatly in demand just then. This was why she had borne herself with dignity and had looked people calmly in the face at times, even when holding the baby in her arms' [17]. Her determinate sense of affording freedom to herself and her foray into the out-of-doors activities bear fruitful results in that Tess's female companions sing songs and show themselves very sympathetic and glad at her reappearance out-of-doors. Their friendliness won her still farther away from herself, their lively spirits were contagious, and she became almost gay' [18].

### III. Individuality, Universality and Social Order

The social solidarity as expressed by the villagers towards Tess can be interpreted as a follow up of the functionalist theory of society. It would be interesting to note that while the social and economic conflicts and hardships in the life of Tess lead her to face tragic situations, the tragic situations in their turn let her to assume a distinct individuality or sense of individual freedom of her own. Furthermore, the assimilation of her individuality with the rank of the commonality has also been witnessed. The prevalence of the functionalist nature of the society, which gives precedence to the common shared social mores and values over individual self-interest, is responsible for the assimilation of the same. Tess can't let herself bypass observing the social order and insulating herself from the process of social-integration. Again, the society also cannot afford to miss out on Tess and allow her to feel alienated from the rest of the society. The gaiety and the bond of fellow feeling as shown by the rustic folk towards Tess have surely prevented her from taking her own life by herself in this instance. This kind of social control where relaxation of social norms to a certain extent can be witnessed merits due consideration. Emile Durkheim [19], the eminent sociologist, developed the concept of 'anomie' [20] in his book *Suicide*, published in 1897. In this book, he explores the differing suicide rates among Protestants and Catholics, explaining that stronger social control among Catholics results in lower suicide rates. According to Durkheim, people always feel a certain level of attachment to their groups, which he calls social integration. Abnormally high or low levels of social integration may result in increased suicide rates; low levels have this effect because low social integration results in disorganized society, causing people to turn to suicide as a last resort, while high levels cause people to kill themselves to avoid becoming burdens on society. However, it ought to be mentioned that a relaxation of the norms in view of the nature of the situation is of utmost necessity. If individuality means distinctiveness of the whole and separateness from others, then we may say that there has been the loss of individuality on the part of Tess towards the end of the novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Tess' sense of dismay on remembering her disgrace and the tragic suffering which occurred in her life due to the role as played by Alec D'Urbervilles occasioned in her mind a desire for the semblance of a life in order. Her act of murdering Alec towards the end of the novel and the consequent punishment levied against her are some instances which inform the regulatory mechanism of a society viewed from a functionalist perspective. In the words of J. Hillis Miller,

Hardy characters are possessed of a longing for God to give order and meaning to themselves and to their world...His characters, in a world without a centre, a world without supernatural foundation, seek unsuccessfully to locate a centre and a foundation [21].

It was in the direction of searching for such a centre or a foundation that Tess was meted out with capital punishment in the city of Wintoncester, where a black flag was raised signifying that Tess' death sentence has been carried out.

Hegel never supports the view that the nature of man consists only in individuality. He attaches great importance to universality. He says of human consciousness that universality is its essence:

Self-consciousness only has real existence so far as it alienates itself from itself. By doing so, it puts itself in the position of something universal and that its universality is its validity...and is its actuality...its claim to be valid rests on its having made itself...conform to what is universal [22].

It is in the book *Phenomenology of Mind* that Hegel says that the world in which man lives is largely a world he himself has created. Social, political, and cultural institutions constitute what he refers to as 'the social substance'. He considers it to be a product of the human spirit and therefore says it to be essentially spiritual. [23] Therefore, Hegel is of the view that the power of individual consists in conforming to that substance, i.e. in emptying his self and thus establishing as the objectively existing substance.

#### IV. Conclusion:

The development of strong individual character and the realization of the sense of individual freedom and self-determinism as is witnessed in the character called Tess in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* inform the process of formation of the individuality of the character. However, the schematic design or pattern of the novel is such that the form of individuality does not sustain itself against the prevailing reign of the functionalist perspective of society in the novel. The pattern of negating social anomie and the design of approximating to its maximum the conformity to universality have made possible such a scheme in the novel.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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- [2]. J.S.Mill, On Liberty, *Utilitarianism, Liberty and Considerations on Representative Government* (London: Everyman edition, 1972), p.15.
- [3]. Conceptions of Individuality, p.175
- [4]. Marcia Bressler Buck, The Effect of Individualism On the American Personality, *Lambda Alpha Journal On Man*, 9(1), 1978.
- [5]. <http://science.jrank.org/pages/9786/Individualism-Individualism-Modern-Society.html>
- [6]. 'Transvaluation of all values' or 'the revaluation of all values' is a concept developed by Nietzsche in his book *Antichrist*. He elaborates the concept in this book saying that Christianity, not merely as a religion but also as the predominant moral system of the Western world, inverts nature and is hostile to life. Furthermore, he says that Christianity elevates the weak over the strong, and is always in favour of exalting that which is ill-constituted and weak at the expense of that which is full of life and vitality.
- [7]. Ibid.
- [8]. George Sorel in his book *Reflections on Violence* suggests the idea that conflict prevents the ossification of the social system by exerting pressure for innovation and creativity. Sorel's call to action was mainly addressed to the working class, yet he opines that it holds true to be of general importance for the total social system.
- [9]. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (New York: Modern Library, 1930)
- [10]. Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Ed. by Angeli Multani (Delhi: Dorling Kindersley (India) Pvt. Ltd, 2006), p.82
- [11]. Ibid. p.82
- [12]. Ibid. p.85
- [13]. Ibid. p.85
- [14]. Ibid. p.86
- [15]. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07762a.htm>. For further study, one may refer to 'On the Principle of Individuation: ST. THOMAS, Opusculum de princ. indiv. in Opp., XVI (Parma, 1865), 328 sqq
- [16]. Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Ed. by Angeli Multani (Delhi: Dorling Kindersley (India) Pvt. Ltd, 2006), p.90.
- [17]. Ibid. p.90
- [18]. Ibid. p.92
- [19]. Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), the eminent French sociologist, is always in favour of developing the sense of social solidarity among the members of the society. In his book *The Division of Labour*, he divided social solidarity into two divisions- mechanical solidarity, corresponding to the primitive society with little or no division of labour; and, organic solidarity, corresponding to industrial society.
- [20]. The term 'anomie' as developed by Durkheim, refers to a breakdown of norms of the society and thereby an unruly situation or condition. For Durkheim, anomie arises more generally from a mismatch between personal or group standards and wider social standards. It also means the breakdown of social bonds between an individual and their community
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