

IN THE NAME OF GOD

**A STUDY OF THOMAS HARDY'S THREE MAJOR
NOVELS IN THE LIGHT OF FEMINISM**

BY

LAYLA RAHIMI-BAHMANI

THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS (M.A.)

IN

ENGLISH LITERATURE
SHIRAZ UNIVERSITY
SHIRAZ, IRAN

EVALUATED AND APPROVED BY THE THESIS COMMITTEE AS:

EXCELLENT

.....*A. Abjadian*.....

A. ABJADIAN, Ph.D., PROFESSOR OF
ENGLISH LITERATURE (CHAIRMAN)

.....*F. Pourgiv*.....

F. POURGIV, Ph.D., ASSOCIATE
PROF. OF ENGLISH LITERATURE.

.....*P. Ghasemi*.....

P. GHASEMI, Ph.D., ASSISTANT
PROF. OF ENGLISH LITERATURE.

JULY, 2002

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To—

my mother.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am deeply grateful to the advisor of this thesis, Dr. Amrollah Abjadian, for his reassurance and support. I would like to extend my profoundest thanks to him for his great patience, knowledge and devotion. I am also thankful to Dr. Farideh Pourgiv and Dr. Parvin Gahsemi for their supportive attitude and their kindness.

And also I want to appreciate the Garmee family for their hospitality and support at the time they remember.

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ABSTRACT

A STUDY OF THOMAS HARDY'S THREE MAJOR NOVELS IN THE LIGHT OF FEMINISM

By

Layla Rahimi-Bahmani

Feministic approach to the novels of Thomas Hardy began in the 1960s. The development of feministic theories revitalized and radically transformed Hardy studies by working on his key concerns of class, gender, and sexuality.

This thesis, which is a close gender sensitive reading of Hardy's three major novels, reveals the ideological tensions and patriarchal metaphysics of the Victorian age. Feminist deconstructive method subverts the views of the traditional male critics who consider Hardy's women as merely sexual objects. Hardy in his novels is a liberal-humanist and feminist who exposes women's socially legally and culturally disadvantaged position in the patriarchal system, and aims at the emancipation of women.

Hardy's heroines are complex characters; they are strong-willed, independent and far from being passive: they are both virgin and coquette,

active and victim and more determined and sophisticated than Hardy's male characters. All his heroines remain unorthodox by the Victorian standard of femininity. His voluptuous heroines have the potentiality of overthrowing the patriarchal system and they are consequently punished severely by this system for their transgression of the man-made boundaries between the sexes. By this punishment the patriarchal force reasserts the duality even more strongly.

Hardy's heroines deviate from the established Victorian conventions and they all fight with an existential defiance, which grants them dignity. Hardy remains the most distinguished novelist for feminists because sex for him is self-justified and the source of other values.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. FEMINISM

Since Women's Liberation Movement of the late 1960s the growth of Feminism has been encouraged by a set of enquiry. Feminism is not a school. Like any other contemporary scholarship, it is a new consciousness. It began with women's campaign for their rights, including social, political and economic equality with men. Women fought for their right to own property, to have access to higher education and to vote. After achieving women's suffrage in the twentieth century, they shifted the emphasis of their movement towards equal social and economic opportunities including employment. A very important part of this general movement was in the field of literary theory and literary criticism.

Women writers and poets tried to establish a tradition for themselves. They felt a void in this field and tried to fill it. They believed that their fate as women poets was to be bereft of a tradition and, as Robbins quotes Elizabeth Barrette-Browning, they "searched everywhere for grandmothers and found none" (xi). Some publishers tried to mark women's place in the literary history by building up lists of forgotten

works of women writers and, thus, to pave the way for establishing their own tradition.

Central to this thesis, is the study of women's experience reflected in various literary texts. Identification with female characters is of crucial importance in this approach that tries to reinterpret and reassess the familiar texts of literary canon. Feministic reading actually challenges the dominant ideology of women's thought and feeling. The traditional view holds that any good literary criticism is *sexless*, or *androgynous*, but feminist critics argue that a universal literary criticism is the one that includes the feminine consciousness. Their initial aim was to revise orthodox 'male' literary history by exposing sexual stereotyping in canonical texts. All feministic criticisms are revisionary. Showalter quotes from Sandra Gilbert that feminist criticism is

revisionary imperative . . . wants to decode and demystify all the disguised questions and answers that have always shadowed the connections between textuality and sexuality, genre and gender, psychosexual identity and cultural identity.
(310)

Feminism attempts to define and clarify some key concepts and their related terms. Before applying feministic approach to any literary work, these concepts should be explained in order to avoid misunderstandings. Since the terms defined in feminism may differ from their general and widespread meanings, any reader applying this method should always bear them in mind through the whole process of reading.

The distinction feminism undertakes to explain between *sex* and *gender* is of crucial importance to their theories and criticism. Sex, as

Robbins explains, is naturally given. It is our “real bodies”. “Sex as biology” is distinct from “gender as behaviour”, which is culturally acquired and marks “social possibilities”. It presumes relationship between sex and power, between nature and culture. What dictionaries miss by their lack of distinction is this power relation (Robbins 6).

Haraway explains gender thus:

Gender is always a relationship, not a performed category of beings or a possession that one can have. Gender does not pertain more to women than to men. Gender is the relation between variously constituted categories of men and women (and variously arrayed tropes), differentiated by nation, generation, class, lineage, colour, and much else. (1)

Gender, to Haraway is not a thing to be possessed, like hair colour or an arm.

Gender and race have never existed separately and never were about performed subjects endowed with funny genitals and curious colours. Race and gender are about entwined, barely analytically separable, highly protean, relational categories. Racial, class, sexual and gender formations (not essences) were, from the start, dangerous and rickety machines for guarding the chief fictions and powers of European civil Manhood. To be unmanly is to be uncivil; to be dark is to be unruly. These metaphors have mattered enormously in the constitution of what may count as knowledge. (1)

For the understanding of sexuality and gender, the full recognition of both is required, for each one relies on the other for definition. Brady in her essay, "Thomas Hardy and Matters of Gender", argues that sexuality is never discreet. The experience of sexuality though seems to be "real", is never direct and is always mediated through culture. She even goes further to say that it is not only mediated but also produced by culture. Brady quotes Judith Butler's argument that "gender is the performance of sexuality within culture" (93). Therefore, readings of any text would be gendered performances that continually change the idea of sexual difference.

Feminists rely on the distinction between gender and sex to distinguish between the three cognate terms of female, feminine, and feminist. Even dictionaries give confusing definitions of these terms. But these terms have different connotations for the contemporary feminist writer. Definitions of these terms by feminism create the main problem of their approach. As Toril Moi has emphasised, only a clear understanding of their differences helps us to grasp the crucial, political and theoretical issues of contemporary feminist criticism. Robbins explains these terms: since the word *female* describes "biological sex" by giving "sexual characteristics", it is a "biological category". The word *feminine*, which describes "gender" as "not the natural attribute of sex" by giving "the behavioural characteristics associated in different contexts and at different times with female biology", is a "social category". The word *Feminist* describes "politics" and believes that the "confusion of biology with culture . . . can and should be questioned", and is thus a "political category" (6).

For feminists, anything that has change as its essence is political. Feminism aims to voice those silenced experiences and to bring into attention the entire marginalized female issues. By exposing these silenced matters, it changes the already established conventional views. "Literature of the world", as Spivak observes, is tied "by a textuality of material-ideological -psychosexual production" (482). Feminism tends to reassess, reinterpret and re-evaluate all the old systems of values. Since any change confronts resistance, it is political. As Spivak cites, deconstruction awakens the resistance of the reader to "an essentialist freezing of the concepts of gender, race, and class" (484). This accounts for the feminists' favourite motto, "personal is political," a phrase coined by Carol Hanish in 1970 (Selden 205). Schweickart calls feminist criticism a "mode of praxis" which aims "to change the world" (428). She goes on defining literature as "an important arena of political struggle, a crucial component of the project of interpreting the world in order to change it" (428).

A deconstructive reading performed through close linguistic and gendered reading reveals the ideological tensions of the age. Feminist deconstructive criticism tends to subvert the orthodox Hardy's "aesthetic ideology" of modern male critics who give a conventional and naturalized perception of Hardy's women as merely sexual objects (Widdowson 81).

Feminism has been divided into different modes of category. Elaine Showalter in her essay "Feminist criticism in the Wilderness" classifies three modes of feminist literary theory: English, French, and American. They are always in flux and greatly overlap in their interests.

There is no sharp demarcation between them. She identifies English feminist criticism with Marxism in its emphasis on “oppression”; French feminist criticism with psychoanalysis in its emphasis on “repression”; and American feminist criticism with textuality in its emphasis on “expression”. She calls them all “gynocentric”, believing that all these modes of feminist criticism struggle “to find a terminology” which will be able to free “feminine from its stereotypical associations with inferiority” (312-3). Showalter demonstrates that these methods, though different, all aim at the same thing. Like any comprehensive and valid approach, Feministic approach is not essentially independent of other approaches. Marxism and oppression, which are materialistic in essence, help to develop British feminist criticism. It concerns the material conditions of people’s lives. It gives a sociological explanation, and thus, becomes a political approach. Any psychic symptom revealing explanation for male or female repressed desires in their unconsciousness is what most interests French feminists, and in its associations they are not political activists. French feminists rely heavily on theories of French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan. For Lacan, language is a realm of public discourse in complete accordance with binary oppositions. Unlike English feminist criticism, which is interested mostly in the content of a literary text, American feminist criticism is highly textual in its focus. Its interest in expression has been institutionally based. Since causes and effects are multiple, these criticisms rely on each other for their validity and vitality.

Feminist theories are pluralists. They borrow from Marxist, psychoanalytic, post-structuralistic, post-colonialistic, and post-

modernist or any other possible learning that may turn useful for their ends. As Robbins observes:

For if women have been oppressed by more than one set of structures, then they may need more than one set of explanations to describe their current conditions, and to prescribe the future improvements. (141)

Feminists try to bring those marginalized female voices and experiences into their spotlight. They try to voice the social deprivations that impinge more on women in a space of disprivilege. Psychoanalytical oppression attacks women for their bodies, cultural oppression views women as objects rather than subjects, and again psychoanalytical oppression attacks women's internalisation of the view of being inferiors. The intersection of all these structures is called *patriarchy*, another key term of feminism. Patriarchy literally means "rule of the father". Feminism attempts to bring this patriarchy, which is at work everywhere, into our attention and make readers read the text differently. Minas calls patriarchy a synonym for "women's oppression" (6). She continues,

. . . because feminists believe that this general organisational feature of society was initiated by men, continues to be maintained by men, and has men as its principal beneficiaries. A belief that patriarchy would be wrong *should* it happen to exist is insufficient for feminism. A feminist must believe in patriarchy's reality, beginning with her daily life as she experiences it. (6)

Minas calls society “sexist” (2), systematically favouring men over women. There have been many other definitions of patriarchy from different perspectives. One definition sees it as a result of relationship between men who marginalize women in their relationship to subordinate them. For Heidi Hartman, says Sedgwick, patriarchy is “relations between men” (451). These relations materially based, give men solidarity and interdependence to make them able to continue their dominance over women. This perspective brings to mind Levi-Strauss’s definition of culture which “like marriage”, is a “total relationship of exchange . . . not established between a man and a woman, but between two groups of men, [in which] the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners” (450).

The Other or *Nonsignificant Other* is a frequently heard term in feminism. Since in patriarchal structures males dominate and control the definitions of what is meant by “human”, they define it according to their own sex, leaving the other sex in the margin as *the Other*. De Beauvoir, who in *The Second Sex* gives a thorough politicised discussion of the place of women in society and culture, begins her argument with the premise that there is no logical and cultural reason for regarding women as inferior to men either by men or by themselves. She believes that in every known society culturally, not naturally, Man is considered as norm and ideal, while Woman is defined as the other:

humanity is male and Man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. . . . She is simply what man decrees; thus she is called ‘the sex’, by which is meant that she appears to the

male as a sexual being. For him she is sex-absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to his essential. He is the Subject, the Absolute-She is the Other. (16)

De Beauvoir goes on to suggest that the image of women in literature as well as in life is man-made. So a modern feminist literary theory begins a critique of these man-made images, the critique of these stereotypical feminine images in literary canons. One of these man-made images to maintain patriarchy and to imprison women is "the Angel in the House" (Selden 204). This was termed by Coventry Patmore. Virginia Woolf defines the characteristics of this "Angel in the House" as "intensely sympathetic . . . immensely charming . . . utterly unselfish", and finally self-sacrificial (Robbins 53).

Binary opposition, another crucial term for feminists, is used by Jacques Derrida, the leading father of post-structuralism. Binary opposition is used to explain the entity of a centre and the existence of an opposing centre, which will be in a superior position while the other becomes inferior. In other words, binary opposition comprises two hierarchically classified terms in which one term seems to be derived from the exterior of the other. For example: Man/Woman. Helen Cixous illuminates this binary opposition in feministic concerns in her essay "Sorties":