The Society in the Late 19th Century and Women’s Rights through *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*

Thomas Hardy is a famous English novelist, and he writes many famous novels, including *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*. *Far from the Madding Crowd* was published in 1874, and *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* was published in 1891. The feminist movements began much earlier in 18th century, and it kept moving on to a milestone of true equality of men and women. Through Thomas Hardy's two novels, *Tess of d’Urbervilles* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*, we can catch a glimpse of a rough portrait of the society at that time by main characters’ personalities, interactions, and what happened when Thomas Hardy published these two works.

In *Tess of d’Urbervilles*, Tess was a brave woman no matter what barriers she confronted. Even though she was raped by Alec, she still had much backbone to face the truth and reality. In fact, at that time, she could request Alec to marry her; by doing so, her family’s economic worse conditions were going to be greatly improved.

> “And you haven’t persuaded him to marry you!’ cried Joan. Why didn’t you think of doing some good for your family instead of thinking only of yourself?”

Her mother, Joan, wanted Tess to marry Alec because she wanted to lead a more

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comfortable life without poverty. Nevertheless, Tess still wanted to be a woman without any unequal treatments despite a great amount of oppression around her.

Tess was a girl who could not live without love. There are two main male characters in *Tess of d’Urbervilles*, Alec of d’Urbervilles who raped Tess, and Angel Clare, Tess’s legal husband, and these two men played roles in Tess. “*You have destroyed my life and his! I can’t bear it, I can’t!*” The man spoke sharply, and after that there was silence.* Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, c2000), p.110

Through these words, we can clearly see that Tess was in great madness and rage because Alec destroyed her life thoroughly. Thus, she killed Alec due to too much pressure overwhelming her. No bystander can forgive this evil man, let alone Tess, a poor girl. At first, Angel Clare could not accept the truth, so he abandoned Tess and left for Brazil ignoring Tess’s love to him. After some years, he finally could accept Tess because of strong love. However, it was too late; Tess was with Alec owing to Alec’s force. After Tess killed Alec, she ran to Angel Clare to find a shelter. “*I won’t leave you! I’ll protect you as well as I can, my dearest love, whatever you may or may not have done!*”* Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, c2000), p.112

Tess finally had Angel’s love, and she could leave with content to face sentence. Love is a necessary element for Tess in her life.

On the other hand, in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, Bathsheba, she was an
independent woman, and could decide almost anything in her life. She refused
Gabriel’s proposal at her will, and there was a vivid and clear description of her.

“No,” she said, “I don’t want to marry you, ……”  
“That’s the problem. I wouldn’t mind being a bride, if I could be one without having a husband. But as a woman can’t be a bride alone, I won’t marry, at least not yet.””
“A woman farmer?” asked Gabriel. “Yes, and a rich one too!” said a villager who was standing near. “She inherited her uncle’s farm, when he died suddenly. She has business in every bank in Casterbridge.” The Inherited fortune laid a strong foundation for Bathsheba to be an ‘Iron Lady.’

Bathsheba was controlled by love significantly. No one can suppress themselves their love and emotions, including Bathsheba. Gabriel Oak was a shepherd, William Boldwood owned a large farm, and Sergeant Troy who was a soldier and loved Fanny Robin who was the maid of Bathsheba. Gabriel and Boldwood both had a crush on Bathsheba, but Bathsheba was attracted by Troy greatly, and she could not stop loving him. Troy was a handsome man and knew how to make women happy and attracted by him. Bathsheba loved Troy too much; she would do anything which Troy asked her to do. Although Troy loved Fanny who was Bathsheba’s maid, still he could not avoid the temptation of Bathsheba’s breathless beauty. Bathsheba followed her mind.

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4 Thomas Hardy, Far from the Madding Crowd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.8
5 Thomas Hardy, Far from the Madding Crowd, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.8
pursuing her true love courageously, and married to Troy despite plenty of opposition.

I would argue that Bathsheba still had less power than men because she was a woman who was limited in a circle which was full of ‘love.’ She was controlled by Troy’s love; she could not live without love.

These two girls, Tess and Bathsheba were beautiful and brave; Bathsheba had more power than Tess, but the ones who were the most powerful were ‘men’. Tess and Bathsheba had limitless courage to lead their own lives – Tess had to support her family in spite of some misfortunes she underwent, Bathsheba needed to become a wise woman to manage the farm, also they had some obstacles in terms of ‘love.’ Due to their prettiness and attractiveness, Tess was raped by Alec; many men wanted to win Bathsheba’s love. Angel Clare abandoned Tess because he could not accept that Tess lost virginity before their marriage; Sergeant Troy who Bathsheba had a crush on loved another woman. They were both eager for true love, and were extremely hurt or upset by love. Tess was a maid always laboring for her masters or mistress; Bathsheba was a mistress who administers a farm, and the workers no matter what genders they were should obey Bathsheba’s orders. Nonetheless, Tess was controlled by Alec because of financial poverty at her home and also controlled by Angel due to love; Bathsheba was controlled by Troy because of love.

Powerful men at that time do not want to enlighten people, especially women. In
order to cater to major trend and to attract more readers, the plots in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* was changed ‘not’ by Thomas Hardy when it was published weekly on *the Graphic*. ‘The biggest change was the excision – altogether – of the plot threads that arguably motivate the entire tragedy: ....... In *the Graphic* version, there is no rape, there is no child; there is no baptism. In place of this multi-chapter sequence is a brief passage describing how Tess, after living at Trantrriage for some weeks, agrees reluctantly to marry Alec, only to discover that the ceremony itself was fraudulent and without legal standing. It is this betrayal, not any sexual activity in the forest, that in the truncated magazine version causes Tess to return to her family at Marlott.’

No author could accept their works changed without their agreement, inclusive of Thomas Hardy. This indeed insults the author’s integrity remarkably. ‘*Obviously this change threatened the coherence and artistic integrity of the novel in the most basic ways, and Hardy was quick to try to repair the damage*, .......’

All I can say is that *the Graphic* version tried to suppress violent issue, feminist movement although it started long time ago.

People at that time, especially men, could not accept the truth that the feminist

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movement had started and roused many voices all over the worlds. Men would not like to lose their power over ‘women,’ and some women may not want to break harmonies and may be exceptionally used to that traditional and unequal society because they were constrained by many conventions over a long period of time.

‘Feminist ideas about sexuality are inextricably linked to feminist struggles around marriage, which has always been seen as the pivotal institution of male power.’ And Thomas Hardy wrote *Tess of d’Urbervilles* to set off great waves in the society and to force everyone to confront it. I would argue that men at that time were extraordinarily afraid to face the feminist movement, and that all they wanted to do was take control of everything including ‘women.’

*Tess of the d’Urbervilles* has more deep and meaningful reflections than *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Compared to *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, *Far from the Madding Crowd* does not have any shocking plots. *Far from the Madding Crowd* only portrays a women surrounded by three men, and it focuses mainly on ‘love,’ and it does not mention ‘rape’ as in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*. Although Troy and Boldwood died in the end, Bathsheba and Gabriel led a happy life. Readers could accept this ending easily than *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*. Thus, it was widely accepted then.

‘Meanwhile the first edition of *Far from the Madding Crowd* sold out in January

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9 Edited by Mary Evans, Feminism: critical concepts in literary and cultural studies (London: Routledge, c. 2001) v.4. p.3
and a second was printed. In American Publishers Weekly talked of “Mr. Hardy’s great novel” and predicted it would be “one of the hits of the season”.'10

On the other hand, reading Tess of d’Urbervilles from the beginning, I kept requesting and reflecting myself. That is to say, Far from the Madding Crowd is somewhat like a novel for entertainment, but Tess of d’Urbervilles is like Revelation in Bible to arouse people at that time to place importance on the issue, women’s rights.

Our thoughts are changed with times; we abandon old, traditional and unsuitable ones, and accept new and good ones. No one can live in her/his own circle full of conventional thoughts, and does not have any influence from modern world. Through Tess of the d’Urbervilles and Far from the Madding Crowd, we can see that the society at that time was filled with inequalities and unfair treatment to women.

Nowadays, women have more rights than women in old times.

Bibliography

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10 Claire Tomalin, Thomas Hardy: The Time-torn Man (Viking, 2006) p.146


5. Claire Tomalin, Thomas Hardy: The Time-torn Man (Viking, 2006)