

**The Issue of Environmental Degradation And**

**Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders***

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Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders*, published in the book form in the year 1887 is a depiction of a transitional moment of history in which a new phase surpassing the old influences the lives of the people of that period. In fact *The Woodlanders* is a quaint story of woodland life focalizing the pain of struggle. It presents the story of betrayal, adultery and disillusion expressing Hardy's acute awareness of the troubling dilemmas of a transitional moment. Here, he portrays pre-industrial England articulating the gradual but irrevocable and all-pervasive effect of industrialization resulting in change and transformation everywhere. Throughout the novel all-pervasive presence of nature can be perceived. So, this paper is intended to explore Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders* from 'ecocritical' stance which affords an interesting insight into the inevitability of natural world in the human world depicting some moments of interdependence in the narrative of the novel. Because:

Ecocriticism is literary and cultural criticism from an environmentalist viewpoint. Texts are evaluated in terms of their environmentally harmful or helpful effects. Beliefs and ideologies are for their environmental implications. (Waugh, 530)

Thus addressing the issue of environment in the narrative of the fictional world of Hardy's *The Woodlanders*, this paper is an endeavour to focus on the environmental issue of a transitional moment. Moreover, this investigation further sheds light how nature penetrates into human life manifesting mutual dependence. The basic assumption with which the novel is analysed is that nature in the novel is not just a device or setting, here the significance of nature lies in functioning as a parallel to human thought and action. So, it can be said that the fundamental impulse behind this paper is rather 'ecocentric':

Ecocentrism means attempting, at least as an imaginative gesture, to place the ecosystem, rather than humanity, at the centre. An ecosystem has no centre, though, except in the purely spatial sense, and hierarchical distinctions between centre and margin, or foreground and background, should collapse. Landscape in a novel, for example, should not function merely as setting, background, or symbol. (Waugh 537)

For better understanding of the critical insight the ‘rough checklist’ of Lawrence Buell’s criteria to determine how far a work is ‘environmentally oriented’ is given bellow:

1. The non-human environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.
2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest.
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation.
4. Some sense of the environment is as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text. (Buell 7-8)

While interpreting the novel the aforesaid principles will be taken into consideration as it shows really an ecocentric outlook. *The Woodlanders* celebrates the intersection of nature, culture and society to project a coherent picture of the human condition. Visualizing external physical nature as a realm of harshness, Hardy here offers us a Darwinian worldview in which each organism struggles for its own survival. But at the same time, one of the most visible features of *The Woodlanders* is manifested in its insistence not only on the harsh reality of nature but also its sombreness. Here nature can be seen in two contrasting modes. Nature is perceived sometimes despoiled either by the work of man or by its own struggles and corruptions. Here we see not only the deformed leaf and strangling ivy, but also the bark being cruelly “flayed” from the branches, the wheels of a carriage silently crushing wild flowers, slimy streams running from “decayed holes caused by old amputations of branches”(159; Ch XIX). At the same time Hardy also shows us the beauty of nature in *The Woodlanders* through “Sombre beauty in the scenery, music in the breeze” (2; Ch I). He shows us the autumn landscape where “the gardens and orchards now bossed, nay encrusted, with scarlet and gold fruit, stretching out to infinite distance under a luminous lavender mist”(208; Ch XXV). Throughout the novel this pattern can be apprehended, drawing our attention to the overall design of Hardy’s narrative. So, *The Woodlanders* brings to light the communion of nature and society.

The title of the novel also draws our attention to the natural world and its gradual transformation. Though set in a secluded community of little Hintock, the impending upheaval looms large in our mind. Hardy here insists on the paradoxical condition of the age and so with that he encapsulates in his narrative not a single thread, but many threads interwoven to form a coherent whole. It reminds us what Dana Philips suggests in his book *The Truth of Ecology*, his suggestion encapsulates the larger need of environmentalism for mediation between the different perspectives of work and leisure, science and imaginative literature, indigenous peoples and tourists—the different aspects of individual lives, for

people with the liberty to move between these positions. In *The Woodlanders* we perceive that bad fortune follows the protagonist at the time of extreme prosperity. There is juxtaposition of a virtuous and innocent protagonist, Giles to a wicked one, Fitzpiers without any moral judgement on the part of the narrator. Thus the novel presents different perspectives and different aspects of individual lives.

The novel begins with establishing a local context for the action, where we are treated to some reflections on “the physiognomy of a deserted highway” (1; Ch I), and a solitary figure appears on the scene. Soon a carrier’s van appears, comes into sight, “half full of passengers mostly women” (2; Ch I) and the deserted highway is populated. In the next scene the barber stands in the darkness outside Marty south’s cottage, and in a suggestive way the narrator conveys the information of the interior from which we can get information about the socio-economic condition of Marty. Basically, the *Woodlanders* opens upon a “wood environed community” (3; Ch I) and to this natural setting Grace Melbury returns to play a part in a drama of “grandeur and unity truly Sophoclean” (4; Ch I). But Grace’s drama is to be “enacted in the real” and the fundamental fact about this basis is a “closely –knit interdependence” between the human and the non-human world: “...Yet where time to time, dramas of grandeur and unity truly Sophoclean are enacted in the real, by virtue of the concentrated passions and closely-knit interdependence of the lives therein” (5; Ch VII). Here, nature is integrated with the human situation signifying wholeness and integrity in a world of disintegration and decay. Moreover, man and nature are entangled in a common mystery of suffering but the progress of man can be distinguished in his capacity for ethical judgement.

In *The Woodlanders* everything –human, animal and plant –is caught up in a struggle for survival. Owls and stoats prey upon mice and rabbits, mice and rabbits feed upon seeds and greens in men’s gardens and men prey upon foxes and rabbits:

Owls that had been catching mice in the out houses, rabbits that had been eating the winter- greens in the gardens, and stoats that had been sucking the blood of the rabbits, discerning that their human neighbours were on the move discreetly withdrew from publicity, and were seen and heard no more till nightfall. (24; Ch IV)

Moreover, people depend on trees on the forest for their fibre and bark, subdue horses and dogs to their wills, and struggle among themselves for economic and social need. Critic like Peter J Casagrande points out that “In *The woodlanders* trees, animals and men (but especially trees and men) are portrayed as similarly travailing, suffering bits of life” (Casagrande 115). The opening chapter underlines the same insight in which Marty South

works with bleeding hands to fill a contract for wood spars with George Melbury and suddenly hears sounds:

A lingering wind brought to her ear the creaking of two overcrowded branches in the neighbouring wood, which were rubbing each other into wounds, and other vocalized sorrows of the trees, together with the screech of owls, and the fluttering tumble of some awkward wood-pigeon ill-balanced on its roosting bough. (15; Ch III)

Thus men and nature both are subjected to suffering, pain and struggle in this greater universe:

...various monstrosities of vegetation, the chief being cork-screw shapes in black and white thorn, brought to that pattern by the slow torture of an encircling woodbine during their growth, as the Chinese have been said to mould human beings into grotesque toys by continued suppression in infancy. (60; Ch VII)

Hardy here addresses the issue of love and marriage which forms the motivating energy of his fiction and this novel narrativizes the disastrous impact of outside life on a secluded community in Dorset. The rivalry between a simple woodlander Giles and the sophisticated outsider Fitzpiers constitutes the main theme of the novel. Here also the narrative of *The Woodlanders* represents a powerful alternative to that form of evolutionary thinking, the influence of Darwin can easily be perceived in *The Woodlanders*, as the remark by Gillian Beer shows:

‘Alongside the emphasis on apprehension and anxiety, on inevitable overthrow long foreseen, persistingly evaded, there is however, another prevailing sensation in Hardy’s work equally strongly related to his understanding of Darwin. It is that of happiness. Alongside the doomed sense of weighted past and incipient conclusion, goes a sense of plenitude, an ‘appetite for joy’. (Beer 224)

George Levine in his article “The Woodlanders and the Darwinian Grotesque”, also talks about the pervasive presence of Darwin in Hardy’s imagination (Wilson 174).<sup>1</sup> Michael Millgate identifies in the novels of Hardy a “microcosm...in which the struggle for existence is everywhere the chief condition of existence” (Millgate 250). As Darwin’s vision is so pervasive in the narratives of Hardy, the remark of Beer or Millgate is justified.

For an understanding of the novel, it is necessary to take an account of the narrative through the historical sense of physical life and nature in the light of the evolutionary thinking. Confronting the problem of nature and the significance of man in an evolutionary world, Hardy establishes a communion between woods and the woodlanders and in that way integrates humanity to evolutionary thinking. From the very beginning nature is integrally

associated with life either positively or negatively; even nature itself is manifested in its sombre and darker modes. In the first chapter of the novel with the depiction of dead leaves of an autumn, the narrator highlights the barrenness and sterility of nature which signifies the gradual but devastating impact of mechanization and industrialization of Victorian era. Again, at the end of the first chapter, reference is made to the “dead leaves which nearly buried the road or street of the hamlet” (5; Ch I). The narrator creates the sense of decay and also a kind of communion of people with the sense of decay and disintegration in the same chapter: “And joined with the scent of decay from the perishing leaves underfoot” (6; Ch I). Throughout the novel, there are numerous examples to convey the sense of decay and desolation which is also interwoven with the lives of the characters. In chapter III reference to the “dead leaves that lay about everywhere” literally meaning the lane on which Marty South came has been “carpeted around with the dead leaves” (15; Ch III). The novel spectacularly begins in a location of Little Hintock in the isolation of the woods. Hardy begins the novel with a very subtle narrative mode where a man who has lost his way on a deserted turn-pike road one “bygone winter’s day” crossing the thick “falling” leaves of autumn, gets help from a passing carriage and arrives at a small group of houses buried in the surrounding woods (2; Ch I). This stranger who is incapable of finding his bearings without help suggests human vulnerability in nature.

The literal struggle for survival in nature is embodied and paralleled in the human situation. In chapter—VII, Hardy explicitly integrates humanity and the natural world: “The leaf was deformed, the curve was crippled, the tapper was interrupted; the lichen ate the vigour of the stalk and the ivy slowly strangled to death the promising sapling” (59; Ch VII). Natural deformities, the crippled curve and strangled sapling develop into a human situation in course of the novel. Through digetic and mimetic elements, the novel presents “unfulfilled intention” of many more characters. Giles Winterbourne and even the oblique presence of Marty South reflect her genuine but unrequited love for Giles. Though Grace Melbury fulfils her father’s ambition marrying a philanderer like Fitzpiers, yet her intention of living a life with her true love remains unfulfilled. Nevertheless her father’s expectation from his educated daughter is also shattered with his realization of the true self of Fitzpiers. So, the novel *The Woodlanders* depicts a cluster of unfulfilled intentions through characters’ consciousness or through the narrator’s colouring— “The unfulfilled Intention, which makes life what it is, was as obvious as it could be among the depraved crowds of a city slum” (59; Ch IV).

Throughout the text there are many more examples of struggle for existence in the human world as well in nature. The state of Grace's running away from Fitzpiers and taking shelter in Giles's hut is represented by some imagery in the natural world.

...At their roots were stemless yellow fungi like lemons and apricots, and tall fungi with more stem than stool, Next were more trees close together, wrestling for existence, their branches disfigured with wounds resulting from their mutual rubbings and blows. It was the struggle between these neighbours that she had heard in the night. (376; Ch XLII)

Throughout the novel, in the midst of disintegration and decay of nature where both man and nature are bound to suffer, some men are capable of coming out of it. Angelique Richardson's comment on the novel *The Woodlanders* is also quite relevant in this regard—"The language of Darwinian evolution in its most sombre aspects pervades *The Woodlanders* (1887), upturning the comfort of pastoral" (Mallett 159). While addressing the issue of evolutionary thinking always an alternative of "death and decay" should be kept in mind; because, "Progress was no inevitable rule" (Darwin 177). The rhythmical pattern of the *Woodlanders* echoes both progress and regress, ascent and descent, forward and backward, up and down as an inevitable corollary to characters, events, environment and overall narrative design. The novel also demonstrates a society which is primitivistic, pastoral value-based and ethical; equally it also portrays a sophisticated, modern, disillusioned, artificial world with a degradation of values. Modern technological development has a devastating effect on the woods. In the same way the advancement of modern world pathetically degrades moral or ethical values of the society.

In *The Woodlanders* opposition of rural and urban values is seen. It shows the co-habitation of two or more cultures and this co-habitation helps bringing the previous and the present century together. Two sets of culture, primitive and modern, run simultaneously in *The Woodlanders*. The primitive culture is represented by Giles, Marty and old Melbury while Dr Fitzpiers and Mrs. Charmond represent a comparatively modern culture. Giles and Marty are *Woodlanders* representing the natural world while Fitzpiers and Mrs. Charmond are outsiders representing urbanite culture. Giles and Marty plant trees and know the woods very well. They are the spirits of the trees. Giles "had a marvellous power of making trees grow...There was a sort of sympathy between himself and the fir, oak or beech that he was operating on ;so that the roots took hold of the soil in a few days" (72; Ch VIII). As a true spirit of nature Giles Winterborn expresses his aversion towards the process of destruction of trees. His bitterness is shown where the human voice has been depicted as 'human bark' at

the time of selling trees—“A voice was shouting intermittently in a sort of human bark, reminding Giles that there was a sale of trees and faggots the very day” (59; Ch VII). Though Giles is dead, his goodness is preserved by the life of the trees he has planted. The trees in the woods as well as the villagers mourn for the death of Giles:

The whole wood seemed to be a house of death, pervaded by loss to its uttermost length and breadth. Winterborne was gone, and the copses seemed to show the want of him; those young trees, so many of which he had planted, and of which he had spoken so truly when he said that he should fall before they fell, were at that very moment sending out their roots in the direction that he had given them with his subtle hand. (393; Ch XLIII)

Marty also conveys the same insight through her discourse: “The young trees sigh because they are very sorry to begin life in earnest—just as we be”(73; Ch VIII).

Grace combines in her both the old and the new. Grace has an acute sensitivity towards the trees of the woodland which is apparent from the following comment of the narrator—“Grace experienced acute regret at the sight of these wood cutting scenes, because she had estranged herself from them ...” (284; Ch XXXIII). At the same time, Grace’s character is also featured by refinement and sophistication of the modern world instilled in her educational upliftment. Through various characters, the novel presents the contrasts of values and culture. The persistent impulse of evolutionism has been incorporated in the narratives of *The Woodlanders* in such accumulation of contrasts in values and cultural paradigm:

Evolutionary ideas shifted in very diverse ways the patterns through which we apprehend experience and hence the patterns through which we condense experience in the telling of it. Evolutionism has been so imaginatively powerful precisely because all its indications do not point one way. It is rich in contradictory elements which can serve as a metaphorical basis for more than one reading of experience...the ‘ascent’ or ‘descent’ of man may follow the same rout but the terms suggest very diverse evaluations of the experience. (Widdowson 53)

Pursuing and resisting the contradictory presentation of attitudes Hardy incorporates a vision of struggle for life and culture. From the very beginning, this contradiction shows profoundly different cultural identities through primitive and modern, past and present, isolation and communion. Though set in a rural world of Little Hintock, Hardy here presents some oppositions rural and urban, outsiders and natives through contrasting characters such as the character of Giles Winterborne, the native representing the rural world and Dr

Fitzpiers, the outsider representing the urban world. All such co-habitation of differences bring back the past as it were, into the present and *The Woodlanders* mediates such apprehension in recollection by various characters.

Thus Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders* expresses all-pervasive influence of 'nature' in human life and culture. Moreover, the future of human life is dependent on the safeguarding and evolving of environmental systems and what Hardy created in his fictional world of *The Woodlanders* can enthrall everyone in this direction.

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