

Revamping the Reality of Marriage: Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895) delivers a Timely Road-map

Amitava Pal

Assistant Professor of English

Keshiary Government College

West Bengal Education Service

India

Abstract:

Jude the Obscure (1895) is the fictional swansong of Thomas Hardy. If on one hand it is a criticism of an elitist and exclusionary education system, on the other hand it is a critique of the society that clings to the outdated and often inhumane, demands of matrimonial proprieties and sanctities. It is not a fairy-tale; it is a scary tale recounting the miseries of those writhing inside derailed wed-locks. The novel becomes remarkable for its portrayal of dysfunctional and coercive marriages, pleading for free-love, and raking up of explosive issue like sexual incompatibility between married couple. Perched in the last decade of the nineteenth century, Hardy here gives a clarion call to take the institution of marriage out of its Victorian shell and make it progressive.

Introduction:

First published in 1895, *Jude the Obscure* was to be the final novel of Thomas Hardy -- not that Hardy meant it to be so, but the scathing reactions that this novel gave rise to prompted Hardy to bid good bye to the fictional genre. And although to today's reader the novel does not appear too radical, it appeared so to a large section of the then public. It unsettled the bedrock of the Victorian orthodoxy by showing that sanctity could potentially be a stranglehold in case of derailed marriages. With its portrayal of a couple of dysfunctional and coercive marriages, pleading for free-love, and raking up of explosive issue like sexual incompatibility between married couple, the novel became too hot for its time. So much so that the Bishop of Wakefield publicly burnt the book and the novel was branded 'Jude the Obscene' although the novel did not indulge in any sensational description whatsoever.

Hardy had touched upon the issue of marriage as well as the problems and patriarchal bias of it in many of his earlier novels. In the mutual truth-telling episode between Tess and Angel in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Hardy shows how society has one standard for male sexuality and another standard for female sexuality. In response to Tess' appeal: "I have forgiven you for the same...Forgive me as you are forgiven", Angel says -- without any explanation 'why' -- 'O Tess, forgiveness does not apply top your case.'" In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Henchard even sells his wife in the fair. In *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Troy gets away with his seduction of Fanny Robin. In *Jude the Obscure*, however, the situation is not so black-and-white. Here the very institution of marriage -- along with various other institutions like education, society and religion -- is interrogated.

Hardy's interrogation of the institution of marriage in 1895, however, was not so unique after all. The Norwegian playwright Ibsen's play *A Doll's House*, first staged in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1889, had already reached and rattled the British public. The trial of the Irish political leader Charles Stewart Parnell in 1890 had also created a lot of furore. The problematic nature of marriage in a changing time had already become palpable and called for debates, discussions and reforms. Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* made a timely appearance and evoked knee-jerking reactions. Havelock Ellis rightly observes: "In *Jude the Obscure* we find for the first time in our literature the reality of marriage clearly recognized as something wholly apart from the mere ceremony with which our novelists have usually identified it."

Jude is, of course, the eponymous character of the novel. His surname is Fawley which, when pronounced, sounds pretty much like 'folly'. An idealistic and unworldly

predisposition is tantamount to 'folly' in this world which has too many barriers and stipulations. Jude starts as a pious youth. At the opening of the novel, he is an impressionable boy of eleven, still caught in his adolescence. His sensitivity becomes clear from the episode where he lets the birds eat grains, while he was entrusted with the task of protecting the fields from birds. What makes Jude remarkable is his ardent pursuit of learning. His aim is to enter the hallowed premises of the university. Christminster in the novel is obviously modelled upon Oxford. However, Jude's serious life-plan goes haywire as he crosses the path of the sexually experienced Arabella who, significantly enough first draws Jude's attention by throwing a pig's puzzle at him. In Hardy's another novel *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Troy tries to win over Bathsheba with his sword-play. In *Jude the Obscure*, the gender roles are reversed. Here the female is the pursuer; the male is the pursued. What is in question is male innocence versus female experience. 'Predatory' Arabella tries to ensnare 'naïve' Jude with her calculated sexual appeal to his repressed desires with a view to obtaining a partner in marriage. Hardy's description of Arabella is absolutely blunt: "She was a complete and substantial female animal -- no more, no less." By using the word 'animal', Hardy emphasises Arabella's primal instincts. Whether or not this description by Hardy could be called sexist or misogynist, one thing is for sure. It is a male-oriented text at this point. Hardy projects Arabella almost as a temptress, a Delilah.

One wonders whether Jude is so dumb-head that he cannot see through Arabella's ploy. Are Jude so 'innocent' and Arabella so 'coarse' after all? In *Study of Thomas Hardy*, D H Lawrence -- who has otherwise been charged of male chauvinism in his own novels -- observes: "Arabella wanted Jude. And it is evident she was not too coarse for him, since she made no show of refinement from the first." In Lawrence's opinion, Arabella 'makes a man of Jude', satisfying 'the female demand in him'. Hardy, the novelist, however harshly exposes Arabella. Her dimples are artificial; her hair is false, and so is her report of pregnancy which prompts Jude to marry her instantly. The marriage itself is thus based on hoax. Hardy, however, shocked the contemporary reader not so much by showing the falsities of Arabella, but by suggesting that Jude and Arabella had physical union prior to marriage. Hardy, however, never dwells in detail on the episodes of physical union or sensationalizes them. They are just hinted at or merely touched upon.

Jude is shocked as the falsities Arabella took recourse to come to light. Arabella, of course, might have her own defence. Marriage is after all a survival strategy for her, not unlike Defoe's heroine Moll Flanders. In any case, the marriage between Jude and Arabella

breaks down, as Arabella leaves England for Australia. This one small detail reminds the reader of the heyday of the British Empire. Australia was then a British colony. Only several decades back, in Dickens' *David Copperfield*, we had seen a group of people migrating to Australia. Anyway, to come back to Hardy, even though Arabella left for Australia, the marriage between Jude and her continued to exist in the eyes of law and society. When Hardy wrote this novel, the provision of divorce was virtually non-existent. It was granted by the parliament on the rarest of rare occasion. Consequently, even in the fag-end of the Victorian period there was no key available to unlock the wedlock even when it had reached a deadlock. Hardy is ahead of his time, and 'modern' rather than 'Victorian', in highlighting the miseries brought upon by a dysfunctional marriage, and thereby asking for the provision of dissolution of defunct marriage-ties.

At first sight, Arabella's complete opposite is Sue Bridehead with whom Jude next falls in love with. Sue is urbanized and less inhibited. She has apparently an intellectual and liberated mind. However, this cousin of Jude is more of an enigma. Not only her eyes are 'untranslatable', but also the trajectory of her mind. She is almost blasphemous; for her the cathedral has outlived its necessity. Sue is training to become a teacher and striving for economic independence. Most unlike Arabella, Sue is beyond 'sexualized body' and moving towards identity. At this point she is the New Woman, like Nora in Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* and Candida in Shaw's play of the same title. Noticeably, Sue is not alone in training for teacher; a total of seventy-one women are enlisted. If so many women are training for jobs, where is the Victorian 'angel of the house'?

However, this otherwise progressive Sue takes a most conventional decision in making a marriage of convenience with Mr. Phillotson, the school-master. Now she becomes Mrs. Phillotson. Her role as a wife now subsumes her individual identity. Sue probably thought that by marrying Phillotson she could enter the mainstream of social life. However, marriage entails physical intimacy, and this is where Sue finds twenty-one years older Phillotson repulsive. Hardy puts under scanner the physical aspect of married life which is usually taken for granted and which is an area of silence in most literature. What if the married wife finds her husband sexually disgusting? Although Hardy is not a feminist, he here touches upon this explosive issue of 'marital rape', although he does not use any such expression. Sue's jumping out of the window to escape Phillotson's sexual embracer signifies her attempt to escape the claustrophobic confines of patriarchal domestic space.

Jude and Sue -- both legally married to other people -- now start living together and also give birth to two children outside wedlock. The novel becomes highly subversive at this juncture. Hardy decimates the stereotypical structure of family. It is out of mutual affection, inter-dependence and 'comradeship' that Sue and Jude maintain this 'live-in' relationship. However, the society is not happy with this arrangement. It ostracizes them, refusing them work and accommodation. The tragedy becomes complete as little Father Time kills himself along with the other children because 'we are too menny'. Sue takes this as retribution, as punishment for her transgressions. She now goes to church, returns to her legal husband Phillotson and to conventional family-life, however closeted, shackled and stifled that space may be. The erstwhile New Woman now crumbles under her accumulated sense of guilt. She now resorts to penance, expiation, and self-abnegation. Jude, however, remains rational and retains his sense of justice. When Sue says, 'It is no use fighting against God!', Jude retorts, 'It is only against man and senseless circumstance' and adds: 'Our ideas were fifty years too soon'. As for Arabella, she returns to England and after Jude's death she is on the look-out for another husband. This time she fixes her eyes on the physician Vilbert. She confesses: 'one must get the old if one can't get the young.' Arabella professionally moves from one husband from another in her quest for sustenance.

Conclusion:

Standing in the Victorian milieu, Hardy thus rigorously questions the irrevocability of commitment which is propagated by the ideology of marriage. Mona Caird aptly observes: "The injustice of obliging two people, on pain of social ostracism, either to accept the marriage-contract as it stands, or to live apart, is surely self-evident." The epigraph of the novel 'the letter killeth' is only too telling. Irving Howe opines: "Coming at the moment it did, Jude played a part in the modern transformation of marriage from a sacred rite to a secular and thereby problematic relationship. "*Jude the Obscure* became a clarion call for the society to make reforms in the right direction.

References

1. Caird, Mona, *The Morality of Marriage*, 1897. Reprint, *The Morality of Marriage: And Other Essays on the Status and Destiny of Woman*, Cambridge University Press, 2010.
2. Ellis, Havelock, *Concerning Jude the Obscure* in Symons, Arthur, *The Savoy: An Illustrated Monthly*, Vol. 6, 1896. Reprint, *Thomas Hardy - The Mayor of Casterbridge / Jude the Obscure*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
3. Howe, Irving, *Thomas Hardy*, Weiden field and Nicolson, London, 1968.