JOURNAL OF ELT AND EDUCATION
ISSN: 2618-1290 (Print), 2663-1482 (Online), Volume 4, Issue 4, December 2021, Page: 93-96
Published by, Hello-Teen Society & Center for Academic Research and Development (CARD)

Received: 30/09/2021 Accepted: 03/11/2021 Published: 04/11/2021

Urge for Change in Contemporary Social Practices through Sarat and Hardy's Female Characters

Comparative Analysis

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[**Citation:** Uzzaman, M. S. (2021). Urge for Change in Contemporary Social Practices through Sarat and Hardy's Female Characters. *Journal of ELT and Education*, 4(4): 93-96.]

Abstract

Bengali writer Sarat Chandra Chattapadyay and British writer Thomas Hardy are eminent writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. However, the tradition and cultures of their societies are poles apart. Remarkably, their affinity in portraying the women characters is evident in their works and fiction. Both of them depicted the extreme suffering of women characters caused by contemporary social improprieties, thereby arousing the readers' sympathy to feel the necessity of change in social traditions. The researcher used explanatory and qualitative approaches for the progression of this study. This paper aims at conducting a comparative study on the treatment of women in the works of both writers. It finds how both the writers expressed the urge for change in age-old social practices in the name of religion and tradition.

Keywords: Women characters, social practice, religion and tradition

1. Introduction

Sarat Chandra Chattapadhyay (1876-1938) is considered the leading novelist in Bengali, reckoning the women's issues prominently in most of his novels (Mahbub-ul-Alam, 2019). Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) was an influential English writer predominantly writing about "women and sexuality" (Morgan, 1988). Both the writers' characterization of women focused on the reality of contemporary society. Their female characters represent the victims of socio-economic conditions, contrived social values and prejudices, social class hierarchy, and religion of contemporary society. Both of them depicted their women as significantly suffering under hostile social circumstances. Still, the readers can discover their immense mental strength, extreme tenacity, mute revolt, and psychological sophistication, which ultimately impacted their society to feel the necessity of change. Their women uphold the doctrine of love and affection, which can win over the adversity of society. The current study aims to investigate or study the treatment of women in the works of Sarat and Hardy and how they expressed the necessity of change in social and religious culture through portraying the silent sufferings of women characters in their works.

2. Literature Review

Hardy's novels always allure the attention of the researchers for their richness of contents and issues to explore. Sarat's novels and stories have also fascinated the researchers at home and abroad. According to the Victorian belief, Tess, as depicted in *Tess of the d'Ubervilles*, is a fallen woman, but

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Hardy claims her as "pure woman" as the subtitle says. Reasonably his subtitle shocked that age known for its conservative customs and religious beliefs. But later on, many researchers have argued that "Tess is to be forgiven... as she is an unfortunate victim of society."

Southerington (1971) in his "Hardy's vision of man" says, "Tess's eventual fate is caused solely by ill-adapted social ordinances." (Southerington, 1971)

Litwin (2016) said, "Hardy constructed the novel so that in telling Tess's life story, the legitimacy of the Church, the legal system, capitalism, mechanization and the status of women were challenged." (Litwin, 2016)

Ingham (2003) suggests that the tragic consequence of most of Hardy's women "led some early feminists to regard him as a misogynist". If we investigate his women characters in his fiction and study his personal life and philosophy, we will find that Hardy had great sympathy for women; he rather wanted to show society's adversities, which cause women to suffer. Hardy himself claimed to be meliorist (Ingham, 2003).

Critics of the early twentieth century censured that Tess was correct in nothing, especially in moral values, since she indulged rape, murdered Alec, etc. Hardy argues against this cultural criticism and opposes the double standard which permits men to have extra-marital relationships but convicts women for the same. Tess had no consent whatsoever to have a sexual relationship with Alec. Instead, she was trapped and raped by Alec, but society accused Tess not Alec, of conceiving a child due to the rape. More so, her illegitimate child was denied to be appropriately buried by church. This is the cultural criticism which Hardy challenged many times.

According to Byrne (2013), "Victorian women were expected to be chaste and modest. These expectations originated from a combination of Judeo-Christian teachings and bygone customs." (Byrne, 2013) Angel believes in this orthodox view which leads Angel accept Tess as his wife and later to abandon her. Angel "[falls] in love with a moral quality rather than a woman," (Hooti, 2011, 632). In the confession scene, "he (Angel) looked upon her as a species of impostor; a guilty woman in the guise of an innocent one," (Hardy, 236). When Angel reveals his short affair with a stranger, Tess forgives him. On the other hand, Tess' confession to Angel about her embarrassing past was considered a crime. The confession scene reflects Victorian social standards where men and women are judged differently for the similar misdeed. Though Tess succumbs to tragic ends, her story is more than a mere tragedy; it heralds the hope of a new era, for a better society. Hardy rightly claimed to be an ardent meliorist since he earnestly believed that the society can be improved and the miseries of lives can be mitigated. Sarat documented the societal impropriety and its atrocious impact on women in his fictions. He also expressed his opinion about state of women in two of his valuable essays' Narir Mulya' and 'Swaraj Sadhonay Nari'. The Western brand of feminism did not influence Sarat. His ideology of narrating women's right and their struggles was adopted from his consciousness of our tradition, society and cultural heritage. Once Sarat's admirer Ray (1975) told him bluntly,

> "There's a streak of weakness in you. You proclaim the message of emancipation from tradition, but you bend to the dictates of society. The quintessential message of your literature is that man is the ultimate measure—humanity is greater than religion—and yet you recognize casteism!" (Ray, 1975)

Sarat also stated, "Bengali society is like this. I've penned the real Bengali character.!" (Ray, 1975)

Ghosh (2007) commented, "By portraying the characters in this way, by evoking pain and anguish in the minds of the readers, Sarat tried to make them realize that these norms, rituals and superstitions and adherence to casteism and untouchability, which make man inhuman."

The story *Bilashi* presents how a lower cast girl used to be treated by society. Being a soft caste girl, she dedicated herself to cure an upper-caste man, Mrityunjoy ignoring the frowning eyes of religious customs and social cultures. Though evicted by society from the life of her man Mrityunjoy, ultimately, her true love reunited them.

Ghosh (2007) further depicted, "Sarat was the pioneer playing the most progressive role in the field of literary creations conducive to the on-going Renaissance movement, national freedom struggle and the movement for social revolution."

However, there was no previous comparative study between Sarat Chandra and Thomas Hardy. So, the author intends to work on this topic to open a new research area for comparative literature.

3. Methodology

The author explores the text analysis results, critics' analysis, and new useful information through the objectives, experiments, comparisons, reasoning, and systematic analysis. The primary sources were the close reading of the texts of *Arakkhaniya* (1916) and *Bilashi* (1938) written by Sarat and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) by Hardy, and the watching movies and dramas based on these on these fictions. The secondary sources are the study materials from the substitute books and research papers from the print and e-journals, and web link access.

4. Discussion and Interpretation

Nineteenth-century is remarkable for Bengali Literature and British as it is marked by the flourishing fiction that witnessed the changing scenario of the society caused by crumbling feudalism and booming industrialization. In Bengali society, the nineteenth century is known as the period of intellectual renaissance. The age-old superstitions, social customs and orthodox views came in for scrutiny and challenge from the new generation of educated Bengalis. Fighting against exploitative practices like *Satidaho* system, restriction on widow marriage and untouchability surfaced in the hands of intellectual trends of the 19th century led the young writers like Sarat. Sarat marked his image as the champion of women rights and his portrayal of women from all walks of life etched his impression over his readers. *Arakkhaniya* and *Bilashi* both the stories of Sarat touched upon contemporary issues ranging from untouchability, orthodoxy, caste discrimination, the status of women in society, and India's inherent customs of religion and social structure with the same intensity. Both the masterpieces drew the attention of the esteemed readers of that time for the subtlety of portrayal of women characters.

In England, the 19th-century witnessed the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolutions, which appallingly brought misery for the working class, forcing them to work under dreadfully adverse conditions. "Women were apparently restricted to the home, or 'private sphere', while men's field was defined as the 'public sphere'" (Thane, 1978). Victorian women enjoyed very limited rights and privileges. Like other Victorian writers, Thomas Hardy's novels project women's state expressing their sufferings and endurances. Hardy's tragic masterpiece *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, subtitled 'A Pure Woman', criticized Victorian views about women and their hostile treatment by religious institutions and legal systems. It is indeed a worth reading novel that unfolds his personal opinion about the textures of Victorian life and women.

Seemingly, both Hardy and Sarat depicted their women characters as victims of socio-religious norms prevalent in society. *Bilashi* being the low caste, Gyanada being the dark-complexioned girl, and Tess being working-class, face society's inconceivable torments yet prove their true love to remain invincible, strong and powerful within. Through depicting their sufferings, the writers criticize the religion and the sham values of society. Both the writers could successfully arise their readers' sympathy with the anguish of the women characters depicted in their novels and stories. Their works contributed to framing the readers' mindset to feel the necessity of reforming society since this society, with its prevalent contrived norms of discrimination, double standard values and religious hypocrisies, cannot ensure women's emancipation and empowerment. All the female characters mentioned above have the strength enough to sustain society's persecution and uphold the agenda of their writers.

Sarat clearly expressed his disagreement with the religious beliefs in showing women as immaculate as a goddess. Like an essentialist, he depicted his women as real human beings who have their strengths and weaknesses like other individuals.

His famous novel *Arakkhaniya* deals with the conflict of physical beauty and inner beauty. Her story restores the faith in the power of love, and her victory outrivals the value of cosmetic beauty. In the narrative, readers can feel the presence of a support system of women, which operates silently in the core zone of patriarchy. *Bilasi* is another famous story of a low caste girl who has been maltreated

for marrying Mrityunjoy, a high borne Hindu. The story is a masterpiece of Sarat Chandra that chronicles the treatment of low caste women in the name of religious customs. The story also unfolds the true love of a low caste girl who wins the heart of an upper caste boy by her love and care. For this true love, Mrityunjoy disowns his society and forsakes inherited properties and happily accepts the life of snake charmer in pursuance of the love of the daughter of a snake charmer.

Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* offers commentary on many prevalent issues of Victorian society. 'Woman pays' is the title of the fifth phase of the novel. The very title says it all, which forecasts the sufferings to be undergone by Tess and epitomizes the state of women of the Victorian era (1837 -1901) when Hardy lived. Tess's subjection to her parents, Alec d'Urberville, Angel Clare, and society as a whole demonstrates the sexual double standard predominant in Victorian society. Tess is a strong character determined to endure hardships and difficulties through various phases of her life.

Moreover, Hardy severely criticizes organized Christianity in several places of the novel, mainly where her illegitimate child is denied a Christian burial. Hardy also pointed out the judicial system, which considers Alec innocent despite his wrongdoing but verdicts Tess to death. Both Hardy and Sarat challenged the orthodoxy of society, which denies forgiving women and punishes them harshly for minor misdeeds. Through their literature, they tried to make people comprehend the inefficacy of the deep-rooted social custom and urgency for a better society.

5. Conclusion

Victorian women were rarely portrayed in literature as having an adventurous life. The life of exploration, travel were men's stories. Hardy portrayed Wessex life in a modified version but within the purview of reality. Women of his novels work outside the home, travel alone beyond their locality, initiate relationships. Indeed, they try to better their lives and mitigate their sufferings with determination and hope.

On the other hand, Sarat Chandra has been able to uphold the Renaissance spirit. He keenly observed the state of women of his time struggling against the social norms but being resolute in pursuing human values and unconditional love. As a writer, he has done his job to propound the necessity of change in society and prepare the platform to build up the mindset of the society, which fueled the renaissance spirit to find its way. It is notable that both the writers explored the immense potentials for the New Women and expressed an urge that society needs to reform to make lives better. Future researchers may seek for comparative analysis of ecofeminism, concepts of New Women in the works of Sarat and Hardy.

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