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Jorhat College Teachers' Unit**

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**Dr. Jyotirmoi Bordoloi
Subhrajyoti Chanda**

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Address : M. G. Road. Na-ali, Jorhat, Assam. PIN-785001

E-mail : tujorhatcollege@gmail.com

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CONTENTS

1. Economic Backwardness and Violence in the North Eastern Region
Dr. Nilima Bora 7
2. Understanding the Political Trends in Colonial Assam through Printed Advertisements
Dr. Soumitra Puzari 19
3. Flood and Agriculture and Riverline Habitation: The Case of the Lakhimpur District of Assam
Dr. Diganta Kumar Phukan 36
4. Sectarian Conflicts in post-Saddam Iraq
Bidyut Bora 47
5. Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*: A Narrative of Male Focalization and Female Anatomization/Dehumanization
Subhrajyoti Chanda 69
6. ROLE OF MISHING WOMAN AND EDUCATION IN CONSERVING AND PRESERVING THE TRADITION OF THE MISHING COMMUNITY OF ASSAM
Pratima Pegu 85
7. Creativity of Adolescent Girl Students in Relation to their Adjustment: A Study in the North West Educational Block of Jorhat District, Assam
Bidisha Borchetia 93
8. Memory as a mode of literary inspiration: An analysis of the work of the Greeks, the Romans and the Romantics
Binoy Chetia 108

Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*: A Narrative of Male Focalization and Female Anatomization/ Dehumanization

Subhrajyoti Chanda

Abstract:

'Linguistic Determinism' the theory forwarded by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, states that the structure and content of the language influence the perception of reality, in other words, reality as perceived is a product of the language in use. Feminist critics make use of this to reveal the sexism in writings which is in the language by default. The distorted reality passed on to the readers is really the product of this inherent sexism. The paper titled "Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*: A Narrative of Male Focalization and Female Anatomization / Dehumanization" aims at tracing the instances of the distortion of reality and thereby show how the language of representation thrives on male focalization on the female anatomy – turning her into an object of interest – with an eye to physical details ignoring the female as a human being and thus strengthening the existing social prejudice.

Full text of the Paper :

Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is a narrative which is replete with instances of male focalization and female anatomization. Tess Durbeyfield is deliberately objectified in the novel and presented as a natural focal point of male gaze. The omniscient narrator draws the character of Tess ('A Pure Woman', the subtitle reads) as a woman who is always at the receiving end – a victim of men's lust and cruelty, a non human (she is consistently compared with animals throughout the text) / a lesser human whose life is peculiarly (and at times ridiculously) guided by chance and for whom death is a relief.

As Tess's hat blows off in the wind while in the carriage with Alec – the fake d'Urberville, the latter comments: 'You look prettier with it off, upon my soul...' (68). While she reties her hat and makes a reply, the omniscient narrator seizes the opportunity to reveal to the readers what Tess' mouth is like:

'No, sir,' she said, revealing the red and ivory of her mouth...Pg.68

This obsession with Tess' mouth and red lips continues through out the novel. While in the cottage of Mrs. d'Urberville, Tess practices whistling – albeit without success – to keep the hens and birds under control; there is an elaborate description of her fruitless trials as seen thorough the eyes of Alec who gaze at her without her knowledge. The voyeur exclaims with triumph her failure

to her embarrassment:

‘I have been watching you from over the wall...and pouting up that red mouth to whistling shape, and whooping and whooping, and privately swearing, and never being able to produce a note’. Pg.73

The idea of peeping toms who gaze at the women is ubiquitous in the novel; the gazer is sometimes human and sometimes things – a source of light (sun / candle / light of the railway engine) and even a shining button on the back of a man’s trouser. The need of somebody/something who should watch over the women seems to be so ingrained in the male psyche of the narrator/author that the women are never left to themselves. For certain arcane reason, the women in the novel are equated with earth while the sun rising from behind the shroud of mist, peering through the gaps in the shutters is given a masculine aspect in the narration; thereby the narrator maintains the conventional dichotomy of the male/female, subject/object, and sun/earth:

The sun, on account of the mist, had a curious sentient, personal look, demanding the masculine pronoun for its adequate expression. His present aspect, coupled with the lack of all human forms in the scene, explained the old – time heliolatries in a moment...The luminary was a golden – haired, beaming, mild – eyed, God – like creature, gazing down in the vigour and intentness of youth upon an earth that was brimming with interest for him. Pg.105

In the agricultural fields where Tess works with the

other harvesters, there are both men and women but the women are the objects, the focal points of the male gaze. It is quite revealing how the narrator describes the men and the many women in the field. There is a longish description of the women – the dress they wear, the way they bind the sheaf, they are explained as an extension of the field/earth:

A field – man is a personality afield; a field – woman is a portion of the field; she has somehow lost her own margin, imbibed the essence of her surrounding, and assimilated herself with it. Pg.106

Further, the roving eyes of the narrator have a field day with many women reapers:

There was one wearing a pale pink jacket, another in a cream – coloured tight – sleeved gown, another in a petticoat as red as the arms of the reaping machine; and others, older, in the brown – rough ‘wropper’ or over – all – the old established and most appropriate dress of the field woman, which the young ones were abandoning. Pg.107

The narrator gives no explanation as to why the old dress is ‘more appropriate’ and in so doing, reveals a mind which is seeped in traditional worldview which is unmistakably patriarchal. The wandering eyes of the gazer rest on Tess who goes on doing her work without paying attention to any body. The use of expressions such as ‘embrace like that of a lover’, ‘naked arm visible between...the gauntlet and the sleeve...’ are indicative of the level of anatomization and male focalization; the

meaning that is implied by the peculiar lexical choices is by the male and intended, as well, for the male; the women – apart from being the subject – have no role. The description almost reads like the modern CC TV footage:

Her binding proceeds with clock – like monotony. From the sheaf last finished she draws a handful of ears, patting their tips with her left palm to bring them even... Then stooping low she moves forward, gathering the corn with both hands against her knees, and pushing her left gloved hand under the bundle to meet the right on the other side, holding the corn in an embrace like that of a lover. She brings the ends of the bond together, and kneels on the sheaf while she tries it, beating back her skirts now and then when lifted by the breeze. A bit of her naked arm is visible between the buff leather of the gauntlet and the sleeve of her gown; and as the day wears on its feminine smoothness becomes scarified by the stubble, and bleeds.
Pg.107

Against this elaborate description with which the narrator reveals the texture of the female skin, the narrator has very little to say about the male reapers. That even the buttons at the back of the men's trousers shine like eyes cleverly alludes to the ever watchfulness of males when it concerns the other sex:

...the active binders...some of them men in print shirts, trousers supported round their waists by leather straps, rendering useless the two buttons behind, which twinkled

and bristled with sunbeams at every movement of each wearer, as if they were a pair of eyes in the small of his back. Pg.106

The women in the field have no escape from the constant monitoring by men. The narrator takes a sexist/patriarchal stance in the description where women are carefully made into objects for the male eyes to feast upon. Tess remains in focus with meticulous details as to how she, at intervals, 'stands up to rest, and retie her disarranged apron' and '[pulls] her bonnet straight' (107). The lack of joy in her life and her hardship in the field is only revealed with a reference again to her emaciating lips: 'the red lips thinner than is usual in a country - bred girl' (107). There is even a curt description of her suckling her baby in the field during the break:

Tess, with a curiously stealthy yet courageous movement, and with a still rising colour, unfastened her frock and began suckling the child. Pg.109

As her physique is described by the daylight in the field, the shape which her aspect takes on in the candlelit dimness at night is also not left to the imagination, the narrator continues with his 'game' of playing peeping tom:

The kindly dimness of the weak candle abstracted from her form and features the little blemishes which sunlight might have revealed - the stubble scratches upon her wrists, and the weariness of her eyes - her high enthusiasm having a transfiguring effect upon the face which had been her

undoing, showing it as a thing of immaculate beauty, with a touch of dignity which was almost regal. Pg.114

Against this sad and sensuous aspect of Tess, there is Angel – Tess' lover and later husband – who appears as a gentlemanly thinker to her; this throws light on the difference between the male and female gaze:

She saw by degrees that since their first and only encounter his mobile face had grown more thoughtful, and had acquired a young man's shapely moustache and beard... Pg.133

The narrator's fixation on Tess' lips is persistent through the length of the narrative; something as innocuous as a little idle talk with Angel acquires a sensuous dimension in the narrative; the sexist idiom, by implication, points the finger of accusation at Tess for drawing the male attention:

'Mr. Clare, you have ranged the cows!' she said, blushing; and in making the accusation symptoms of a smile gently lifted her upper lip in spite of her, so as to show the tips of her teeth, the lower lip remaining severely still. Pg.144

Further, there is an elaborate description of how Tess carelessly moves through the wet garden covered with cuckoo spittle and slug slime pulled by the strumming of strings:

'She went stealthily as a cat through this profusion of growth, gathering cuckoo – spittle on her skirts, cracking snails that were under foot, staining her hands with thistle – milk and

slug slime, and rubbing off upon her naked arms sticky blights which, though snow – white on the apple – tree trunks, made madder stains on her skin; thus she drew quite near to Clare, still unobserved of him'. Pg.145

The lexical choices – 'cat', 'naked arms' and 'madder stains on her skin' are revealing; this is another instance of dehumanization and anatomization of the female protagonist. She is rarely represented as a whole – as a human being; she is described in parts: sometimes it is her hair; sometimes her gait; sometimes her attire and almost always her mouth and red lips. The answer to the question 'for whom the stains on Tess' skin madder?' is of course Angel, the voyeuristic male. Further, the metaphor 'madder stain' is an instance of deviant collocation for stain by itself is neutral; it is neither sane nor mad. However, it assumes a sensuous dimension in the given context to the eyes of the male watcher and also to the readers, courtesy the narrator. The narrator's patriarchal point of view, which aligns itself with that of Angel and on another occasion with Alec's, is exposed unmistakably.

Tess milks while gazing at a distance in Talbothays dairy; she has developed this very individual style of milking there. The narrator's pen almost creates 'cameo' of her with the sun's rays brightening her up against the dun background of the cow; she continues to look side ways indifferently without knowing that Clare was following her:

She was milking Old Petty thus, and the sun chancing to be

on the milking – side it shone flat upon her pink – gowned form and her white curtain – bonnet, and upon her profile, rendering it keen as a cameo cut from the dun background of the cow.

She did not know that Clare has followed her round, and that he sat under his cow watching her... Pg.174

The focussed eyes of Angel Clare explores the feminine beauty while the objectified woman, even after realizing the presence of the man watcher, makes no attempt to move – she seems to have resigned herself to the passive state. This description reveals facets of the Victorian minds – how the females reacted to the male gaze and what the males understood of that:

And it was in her mouth that this culminated. Eyes almost as deep and speaking he had seen before and cheeks perhaps as fair; brows as arched, a chin and throat almost as shapely; her mouth he had seen nothing to equal on the face of the earth. To a young man with the least fire in him that little upward lift in the middle of her red top lip was distracting, infatuating, and maddening. Pg. 174

And her reaction:

She then became conscious that he was observing her; but she would not show it by any change of position... Pg.175

The disconcerting obsession with the female anatomy is matched by the clever dehumanization done by the use of distinctive similes – while talking about Tess, the narrator

invariably uses animals (cat, snake, toads etc) for comparison. The readers are also invited to share through the narration the exploits of men's gaze. Natural human reflexes which are otherwise usual attain an unnatural sensual dimension through the creation of a reality which is the product of the sexist idiom. But this cooked up story of the female interest in sex is well appreciated by the readers being caught in the workings of linguistic determinism which tells how reality in the human mind is really the product of the language used. The author wants the readers to adopt a certain perspective, and most readers do so without questioning:

She had not heard him enter, and hardly realized his presence there. She was yawning, and he saw the red interior of her mouth as if it had been a snake's. She had stretched one arm so high above her coiled – up cable of hair that he could see its satin delicacy above the sunburn; her face was flushed with sleep, and her eyelids hung heavy over their pupils. The brim – fullness of her nature breathed from her. It was a moment when a woman's soul is more incarnate than at any other time; when the most spiritual beauty bespeaks itself flesh; and sex takes the outside place in the presentation. Pg.195

By what stretch of imagination can a human mouth be compared with that of the snake is unclear and moreover the comparison is not accurate, it is fact that the interior of the snake's mouth is not always red. The snake imagery continues even in the description of the 'coiled – up cable

of hair'. That the author is alluding to the biblical association of the serpent with the deceiving Satan is quite evident, and it seems that the Victorian readers hardly missed the author's implication that not the male but the female (read Tess) is the deceiver/seducer. But now it can well be argued that it is not the woman's but it is the man's (Angel's / Alec's) mind which is filled with sex and which the sexist pen of the author tries to hide and therein lies the irony. Having used the light from the sun and the candle to focus on Tess and violate her privacy; the narrator turns to the light from the moving train engine in the rain to highlight her in the rains. But bafflingly, the narrator notes that Tess would appear like a 'friendly leopard at pause' to the 'cranks and wheels' of the speeding engine. The constant attempt at dehumanization of the woman touches a ridiculous level in the narrative:

The light of the engine flashed for a second upon Tess Durbeyfield's figure, motionless and under the great holly tree. No object could have looked more foreign to the gleaming cranks and wheels than this unsophisticated girl, with the round bare arms, the rainy face and hair, the suspended attitude of a friendly leopard at pause, the print gown of no date or fashion, and the cotton bonnet drooping on her brow. Pg.214

Tess loses her husband – Angel's sympathy as she recounts the incidents in her life; his love and sense of justice surrenders to his Victorian sense of morality which eventually makes him desert his newly wed wife and migrate

to Brazil. From being 'a friendly leopard', Tess further drops in hierarchy to an amphibian – 'a toad' in the narrator's representation; the innocence and beauty is replaced by ugliness:

A large shadow of her shape rose upon the wall and ceiling. She bent forward, at which each diamond on her neck gave a sinister wink like a toad's... p.257.

Why a graceful woman like Tess suddenly should suddenly appear toad like can not be reasoned, it only speaks of the deep set Victorian prejudice. The moment she tells the truth, opens her heart – the dignity is lost, ugliness replaces beauty; everything she does takes on a sinister proportion. The paradox in the author's position is evident, on one hand he talks of 'Victorian prejudice' but he himself can not escape that prejudice for it is he who compares her with a toad at the first place. The women workers in the desolate field in Flintcomb Ash farm who work under the white sky and the drab earth are described as flies – in a way suggesting that the women have no significant roles, they are at someone else's mercy:

...the white face looking down on the brown face, and the brown face looking up at the white face, without anything standing between them but the two girls crawling over the surface of the former like flies. Pg.322

And in another instance the narrator by implication suggests that the condition of the women in the flint comb Ash farm were like the 'strange birds' from behind the North Pole :

...gaunt spectral creatures with the tragical eyes – eyes which have witnessed scenes of cataclysmic horror in inaccessible polar regions of a magnitude such as no human being had ever conceived, in curdling temperatures that no human being could endure. Pg. 325

The narrative which is undoubtedly marked by sexism does also contain a faint voice of resistance even though it turns fatal and self destructive. Her unhappy experience with Alec and Angel makes Tess indifferent to the male gaze but the cruel treatment she receives from her husband makes her defiant at the voyeuristic world and she deliberately makes herself appear ugly to the male gaze through self abnegation:

‘...she entered a thicket and took from her basket one of the oldest field – gowns, which she had worked among the stubble at Marlott. She also, by the felicitous thought, took a handkerchief from her bundle and tied it round her face under her bonnet, covering her chin...then with her little scissors, by the aid of a pocket looking glass, she mercilessly nipped her eyebrows off, and thus insured against aggressive admiration...’.Pg.316

And on another occasion, Tess – once demure and docile – throws back her veil and faces the world which is partial to men:

She did, indeed, take sufficient interest in herself to throw up her veil on this return journey, as if to let the world see that she could at least exhibit a face such as Mercy Chant

could not show. Pg.340

And later, she even acquires the strength to stare at the male (Alec) hard enough so that the habitual viewer/voyeur has to say:

‘Don’t look at me like that...’Pg.348

The hypocrisy in Alec is revealed when he places the cause of Tess’ sorrow squarely on her shoulder; it was her good looks which made him do what he did, in other words she is responsible for her seduction. He further notes that her corrupt influences upon him have checked his progress towards salvation. What is interesting is that the narrator appears to share the same prejudice:

He laid his hand on her shoulder. ‘Tess, my girl, I was on the way to, at least, social salvation till I saw you again!’ he said freakishly shaking her, as if she were a child. ‘And why then have you tempted me? I was firm as a man could be till I saw those eyes and that mouth again – surely there never was such a maddening mouth since Eve’s... ‘You temptress, Tess; you dear damned witch of Babylon – I could not resist you as soon as I met you again!’ Pg. 363

The game of blaming the victim continues; the woman who is at the receiving end is brainwashed into understanding that she is the cause of her own suffering, the seducer moralizes thus:

Of course you have done nothing except retain your pretty face and shapely figure. I saw it on the rick before you saw

me – that tight pinafore sets it off, and that wing – bonnet – you field – girls should never wear those bonnets if you wish to keep out of danger. Pg.370

The extract echoes the sentiment of the narrator who has commented at the beginning that field girls should stick to the traditional dress code.

But she can not take the insult lying down when on another occasion he accuses her of being the ‘cause of [his] backsliding’ and therefore must, as a compensatory measure, leave her husband and come with him:

One of her leather gloves, which she had taken off to eat her skimmer – cake, lay in her lap, and without the slightest warning she passionately swung the glove by the gauntlet directly in his face. It was heavy and thick as a warrior’s, and it struck him flat on the mouth. Pg.372

And this act of defiance culminates in her murdering of Alec – an impulsive act, the result of years of suffering in silence and which eventually earns her death sentence.

Sun which has been described by the narrator as a brilliant god like being, intrudes into her respite under the shadow of the ancient Stone Henge and wakes her up:

Soon the light was strong, and a ray shone upon her unconscious form, peering under her eyelids and waking her. Pg.443

Tess till the end remains the object of the male

focalization, and even at the end the eyes of Angel and Liza
– Lu are riveted on the flag pole on the cornice of the tower.
Tess's hanging is represented by a black flag which is raised
up slowly to signify that the sentence has been carried out,
and the drabness of the black colour of the flag suddenly
gets foregrounded against the eloquent redness (of the lips
of the now dead) of which the narrative is so replete!

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