A Study of Hardy as a Novelist of Protest

With Reference to two novels – Tess d’Urbervilles and Jude the Obscure

By Dr. Iman Abdullah Al Mahdi
Abstract

[The article is an exploration into the multi-faceted vision of Hardy which had been implanted in his novels so meticulously that every aspect of it reveals a new facet and a new consciousness. This is in line with the modern criticism which is trying to deflect its attention from Hardy’s off-repeated dark philosophy to his new concepts and experiences embedded in his novels. And so in this article we have tried to present him as a novelist of Protest who, in his novels, studies the Victorian society and its evils and protests against them because of their crippling and destructive impact on the individual. So the new picture presented is that of a socio-psychological novelist who studies the orthodox society in order to explore its evil impact on the psychology of the individual. The number of neurotic individuals is increasing. In the absence of freedom man’s mental growth is stunted. He is maimed and made sick. This is because the society makes one very insensible demand – conform or get destroyed. There is no escape from or protection against this demand. The individual has to protest against it till eternity. The society may force him to die. Tess may die; she will be replaced by ’Liza-lu. The hope for the regeneration of the individual is there in this Protest till eternity. It is a protest with hope.]

This world’s no blot for us,
Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good:
To find its meaning is my meat and drink.

(Browning: Fra Lippo Lippi)
What Browning says about the world in general can also be said about the world of Hardy in particular. For us, it is ‘no blot’; it might have been for the Victorians. Now, he is an enlightened spirit who “means good” for the world and its people. His novels are not “blank”. They “mean intensely”. A deep meaning is embedded in them. We should make it our creed “to find its (their) meaning” – so various and so noble. In this article we are trying to find a new meaning in them and to present them in a new perspective. Carpenter says:

Hardy’s philosophy is an integral factor in his work. But its function as a system has been too long overemphasized, and letting it lie fallow for a few decades will do no harm. ¹ (204)

Our perspective is changed; from his philosophy we turn to his sociology – his scientific study of societies and the behaviour of people in groups. It is a study of man and his place in the universe, world and, at the lowest level, his society. In his philosophy, the man is at the periphery rotating there as per the wish and direction of these forces. In his sociology, man has his own emotions and ideas and wants to live according to them. Naturally, he tries to assert himself. There is a clash. There is man’s protest – vociferous and strong. Hardy concentrates on this man as Shakespeare has done in his dramas. Hardy cannot match Shakespeare. Yet, in his own way, he has tried to raise his status by protesting, in his favour, against the bias, distorted vision and unjust behaviour of these forces. They dump him into oblivion. But he always raises his head and protests. So Hardy believes in man’s strength to rise, to fight, to make his way and to stand upon his feet again and again. It is this belief in man’s protest and change that makes him call...
himself a meliorist rather than a pessimist – a meliorist who believes in man’s capacity to change his fate and life. If he wishes, nobody can stop him. And so, in his novels he concentrates on the cruelty of man and society; the immeasurable value of each human being, the tragic waste of human potential and, finally, man’s protest against all these things.

When Hardy began work on the novel “The Poor Man and the Lady”, at the age of twenty-seven, he tells us that,

He considered that he knew fairly well both West-country life in its less explored recesses and the life of an isolated student cast upon the billows of London with no protection but his brains – the young man of whom it may be said more truly than perhaps of any, that ‘save his own soul he hath no star’. The two contrasting experiences seemed to afford him abundant materials out of which to evolve a striking socialistic novel – not that he defined it as such, for the word had probably never, or scarcely ever, been heard of at that date.² (56)

His ‘socialistic novel’ is not a political novel based on the principles of socialism. It will be a novel of a poor individual – a commoner – protesting against the then social ethics and ethos in his efforts to reach the unthinkable heights of the elite, an heiress. A mere poor architect from an obscure home in Wessex is aspiring to marry an heiress. This is the man, helpless, poor, but nursing a great aspiration within his soul. It makes him stand up, face and fight against the orthodox society. It may be an uneven fight but he takes up the challenge and protests by eloping with the Lady but unfortunately she dies. But his protest against the ‘vulgarity of the middle-class’ and ‘modern
Christianity’ does not die. Rather it becomes more radical and he joins the left-wing politics. It is this radicalism of the hero that persists, in a smouldering way, in most of the novels he wrote later on. This is Hardy’s sociology of socialism.

This point becomes all the more clear when we compare two different passages written by two different novelists:

The poetry of motion is a phrase much in use, and to enjoy the epic form of the gratification it is necessary to stand on a hill at a small hour of the night, and, having first expanded with a sense of difference from the mass of civilized mankind, who are dream wrapt and disregardful of all such proceedings at this time, long and quietly watch your stately progress through the stars. After such a nocturnal reconnoiter it is hard to get back to earth, and to believe that the consciousness of such majestic speeding is derived from a tiny human frame. (150)

This one is from Hardy’s novel “Far From the Madding Crowd”. Another one is from Lawrence’s novel “Rainbow”:

But during the long February nights with the ewes in labour, looking out from the shelter into the flashing stars, he knew he did not belong to himself. He must admit that he was only fragmentary, something incomplete and subject. There were the stars in the dark heaven travelling, the whole host passing by on some eternal voyage. So he sat small and submissive to the greater ordering. (100)
Both writers are expressing the sense of awe which is felt by a solitary person on looking at the stars. Lawrence clearly says that man is something small and insignificant. The moving stars belong “to the greater ordering”. Hardy does not say so. On the contrary, he feels that the whole universe takes its meaning from man’s presence – “the consciousness of such majestic speeding is derived from a tiny human frame.” The stars are majestic but no creature in the universe, save man, notices them and makes them look majestic. Otherwise, their majesty will be unnoticed and so insignificant. Thus, in Hardy, it is man that gives meaning to this Creation, what if he is tiny. In the tiny frame he has greater consciousness. So the universe and its beauty are from and for him. That is the man about whom he talks about in his novels. He has always taken for his hero a young man who has been cast adrift in a moral and intellectual wilderness in which there are no fixed rules to guide him, only the promptings of his own soul. This is the theme in “The Return of the Native”, “Tess of the d’Urbervilles” and “Jude the Obscure”. In this wilderness, he tries to sow some seeds of human consciousness, what he knows to be truer ideas, feelings and opinions which come out directly from his own soul. But in this wilderness everything gets dry and dead. Nothing grows in this waste land. Any effort to grow, as it were, is not permitted. There is a clash; man protests against this injustice to man. Ultimately man has to die, protesting and fighting.

This is what happens to a girl of the type of Tess when her values collide with the Victorian moral code. Richard Carpenter says:

An essentially good and natural character is destroyed by the combined powers of society and circumstance.\(^3\) (124)
He carries on his argument from here to point out the basic line of Hardy’s protest:

In **Tess**, however, basic moral assumptions of the Victorian age come in for barbed criticism: the cruelty of a “moral” code which condemns the innocent victim of a seducer (perhaps a rapist) to ostracism while he goes scotfree; the double standard that enabled Angel to palliate his own sins while condemning Tess. Although its “message” is comprised in dramatic situations rather than in tractarian statement, **Tess of the D’Urbervilles** is a frontal attack on some of the bastions of Victorian mores, and was recognized as such.⁴(126 -127)

Angel does not know the events that have already taken place in the life of Tess. He does not know the roughness of life in the English villages. He does not know that she has been seduced by a rich gentleman. She has a baby – an illegitimate one – at the age of sixteen. Tess is thus uncomfortable at Talbothays. Her instincts always remind her of her fall in the eyes of the society:

Her face had latterly changed with changing states of mind, continually fluctuating between beauty and ordinariness, according as the thoughts were gay or grave. One day she was pink and flawless; another pale and tragical. When she was pink she was feeling less than when pale; her more perfect beauty accorded with her less elevated beauty; her more intense mood with her less perfect beauty.(200)
The whole character and personality of Tess have been mauled and deformed. The innate natural beauty has been mercilessly destroyed by the savage law of the society and animal behaviour of a rich and high man in the society. An innocent, pure woman suffers from the idea of guilt. Here, Hardy takes himself from sociology to psychology. He tries to study the impact of social evils on the mind and personality of an individual. The unjust moral code of the society forces an individual to suffer from guilt and sin; naturally he does not remain his natural self. He is a twisted man. Here we remember Mill and his ideas in his book – On Liberty. What frightened Mill about the tyranny of society was that this was bound to produce distorted human beings:

Its ideal of character is to be without any marked character; to maim by compression, like a Chinese lady’s foot, every part of human nature which stands out prominently, and tends to make the person markedly dissimilar in outline to commonplace humanity.\(^5\) (60)

Man intends to live an innocent, pure life but he is forced to live with the stigma of sin. It is the same with Sue and Jude in the novel Jude the Obscure. Sue contemplates the psychological change that she is undergoing under the system of marriage; she is losing her own real, natural self:

‘I have only been married a month or two,’ she went on, still remaining bent upon the table, and sobbing into her hands. ‘And it is said that what a woman shrinks from – in the early days of her marriage – she shakes down to with comfortable indifference in half-a-dozen years. But that is much like saying that the amputation of a
limb is no affliction, since a person gets imputably accustomed to the use of a wooden leg or arm in the course of time.’ (90)

The impact of a forced married life – forced under the prevalent social circumstances and laws – is that Sue feels that her life and personality have been maimed, amputated. In place of natural legs or arms, she is being forced “to the use of a wooden leg or arm in the course of time”. It is the same idea that we find in On Liberty, that if people are forced to live in ways which they do not want then their whole personalities will become distorted. Just as Sue has to suppress the real, vital part of herself when she is married to Phillotson, so Jude, too has to give up the dream of becoming a student which means almost everything to him. Psychology says that such a suppression of the self creates neurosis – an abnormal state of mind – in which man takes extreme steps which are dangerous for the man as well as the society. Tess takes an extreme step in protest when everything is made so unbearable by the society. She takes to the murder of her former seducer and willingly becomes ready for the gallows.

Sue and Jude do so in protest. They become ready to abjure “domestic ties of a forced kind” (92). In protest, they do something unconventional for they both find it psychologically impossible to go through a legal ceremony.

This study reveals the socio-psychological approach of Hardy to problems faced by man. Misdirected and crippled institutions and laws of the society are responsible for creating mentally sick persons, neurotics. Such institutions should be closed for happiness and well-being of the individual are more important. The society is sick because it has hordes of
sick individuals. Thus there is a direct connection between the two – a sick society and a sick man.

His heroes and heroines, in spite of their tragedies, carry on, in the words of the novel “The Return of the Native”, “slighted and enduring” (10). In the same novel Hardy spoke of “. . . the views of life as a thing to be put up with, replacing that zest for existence which was so intense in early civilization” (10). What is heroic in man is his ability to put up with “solitude, pain of heart, distress and poverty”, and still carry on. That is also a form of silent protest against the terrible forces of society, Nature and God. It may be called pessimistic. But, to Hardy, that is the only realistic creed that encourages man to stand firm against the merciless onslaught of the powerful forces. He has to because under the conditions of modern life he can hardly help it. For modern society is diseased, often cruel and inhuman and the conventions it lays down are, in many ways, unnatural. Tess has been made to break an accepted law, but not any law that exists in nature. Naturally there is a conflict between natural human feelings and social conventions which, in the end, destroys her. As a protest against this injustice done to a poor woman that Hardy perhaps added a sub-title to the novel “A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented”. She is subjected to intolerable pressure: she has been seduced; she has borne an illegitimate child; she has married, been deserted by her husband and lived with her seducer. And yet she is punished; her only serious fault, above all these faults, is that she is a woman. Social policy of gender segregation works here. This gender bias is apparent in her husband, Angel. What causes him to reject her is not his natural feelings, but the residue of gender prejudice left by his upbringing:
With all his attempted independence of judgement this advanced and well-meaning young man, a sample product of the last five-and-twenty years, was yet the slave to custom and conventionality when surprised back into his early teachings. (200)

Here Hardy comes to protest against the Orthodox Victorian society that does not permit a change. It is not an easy thing to be ahead of one’s time, at any rate, not in Victorian England. The most sincere convictions are liable to crack under a personal shock:

It takes two or three generations to do what I tried to do in one . . . As for Sue and me . . . when our minds were clear, and our love of truth fearless – the time was not ripe for us! Our ideas were fifty years too soon to be any good to us. And so the resistance which they met brought reaction in her, and recklessness and ruin on me! (200)

These are the words of Jude, dying of exposure and neglect in what was holy city, Christminster. Here again the stress is upon the psychological impact of the Orthodox Code of the society. The society resists them and their unorthodox ideas. This resistance creates a “reaction in her” and “recklessness and ruin on me”. “Reaction in her” suggests a psychological change in her attitude and behaviour – a change from the natural to unnatural – because she disapproves of the way in which things were done in the past. His “recklessness” suggests his carelessness or lack of worry about the possible bad or dangerous results of his actions. Both the mental states are stages of neurosis which, if not controlled, leads to depression and
desperation that ultimately “ruin” a man. This ruin comes from the social demand for compromise and to conform to the established pattern.

And then there is nobody to save him and her. If they are not ready or capable enough themselves, they are doomed. In such a situation the Victorians remembered God as their savior. Everybody remembers the famous optimistic line of Browning; ‘God’s in his heaven: all’s right with the world’. But, in anguish Angel says in Tess; ‘God’s not in his heaven: all’s wrong with the world’ (101). What compels Angel to make this unorthodox statement is not any philosophic attitude to life. He comes to this conclusion compelled by the social circumstances prevailing round about him. If it is to be taken as a pessimistic philosophic attitude, it comes directly from his social realism – it is, in fact, a realistic sociological – cum – psychological study of the then society and man’s life leading to a philosophical conclusion. More than a philosopher, Hardy shows himself to be a social realist. If it is not an exaggeration, we can say that his dark philosophy is the by-product of his dark social realism to which he had never closed his eyes and against which he had been so vociferously protesting in his novels. In the following lines Hardy talks of the social realism taking precedence over high philosophy of life.

As to pessimism. My motto is first to correctly diagnose the complaint – in this case human ills – and ascertain the cause: then set about finding a remedy if one exists. The motto or practice of the optimists is : Blind the eyes to the real malady, and use empirical panaceas to suppress the symptoms.\footnote{7 (383)}
'The real malady’ is in ‘human ills’. First, their ‘cause’ is to be ascertained. Mere ‘empirical panaceas’, mere philosophical ideas will not do if we ‘blind the eyes to the real malady’.

This is a very clear statement in favour of taking care first of the sociological problems and then finding out their socio-psychological solutions. Mere philosophical statements would not do. So even in Hardy’s view, philosophy should take a back seat.

He has the solution. If it is beyond the power of man to change the present society, he must at least stand up and fight. In the mean time man must create his own values, for, living in a universe of cruelty and chaos, he will find no guidance from anything outside himself. This is his agnosticism and meliorism. It saddened him that critics approached his work with an ignorant prejudice against his pessimism which they allowed “to stand in the fair reading and fair judgement”8(202). He preferred to call himself a ‘meliorist’, that is, one who believes that the world can be made better, if people try. With his protest, he wants to show the way to improvement.

Hardy wanted to treat social problems in a mature and broad way. That is why he also considered the effect on ordinary people of economic instability and social climbing. In fact, these two diseases of the society initiated the downfall of Tess. Hardy criticizes the agricultural situation for creating such a lack of security that a woman has to go out far away from home to get a job. Then sharp criticism is also directed to the pernicious idea that better classes will be better than the simple country folk.
Hardy’s social consciousness makes Tess what it is before us today – the “most moving dramatization of a pure soul struggling with the inscrutable evils of existence” (138). The real tragedy – social and moral – behind Tess is saturated with exaltation because Hardy has always kept his protest against and criticism of the social and moral evils at a substantially higher level. They are trenchant, expressed very strongly, effectively and without worrying about offending people, yet they are imbued with a soft quality of earnest feeling that quickly and quietly touches our hearts today. His sociology – a study of the society and the people – has become normative suggesting certain norms and values needed for the amelioration of the fate of man in this tragic universe. As such Hardy can also be called a humanist. Tess dies but she lives still in the form of her sister ’Liza-lu. This is the hope for man who will rise again from the ash and again will face the world and its evil, make a protest against them in order to gain an ascendancy over them. The protest will go on till eternity, till the society is not changed for the better.

The other famous novel of Hardy; Jude the Obscure, is also on the same pattern, although more unorthodox, explosive and bitter in its protest against the unbearable social evils that cripple the lives of the people. In this novel, he openly shares the views of thinkers like Mill (On Liberty) and Milton (Areopagitica). The three thinkers are of one mind so far as the individual and his freedom are concerned. If freedom is denied to the individual, the whole society will suffer. Sue is trying to persuade her husband to let her leave him:

Sue continued: ‘she or he, “who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him, has no need of any other faculty than
the ape-like one of imitation”. J.S. Mill’s words, these are. I have been reading it up. Why can’t you act upon them? I wish to, always.’

‘What do I care about J.S. Mill!’ moaned he. ‘I only want to lead a quiet life!’ (110)

Under the influence of this idea on liberty Phillotson becomes ready conscientiously to let his wife go. This part of the novel has a Preface with the lines from Milton:

Who so prefers either Matrimony or other Ordinance before the good of man and the plain Exigency of Charity, let him profess Papist, or Protestant, or what he will, he is no better than a Pharisee.”

Hardy is clear about two facts here: First, human happiness is more important than the institutions; Second, unhappy and uncomfortable marriage should be dissolved.

Mill feels that “society . . . practices a social tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression . . . .” The novel, Jude, is all about this tyranny. All the characters in the novel are unorthodox and unconventional. Naturally the society punishes them. Phillotson frees the wife but is himself persecuted; he also loses his job. Jude is a working-class boy desiring to study at Oxford; he is not allowed because of class-prejudice. Sue feels forced to conform and forces herself to go back to Phillotson. Phillotson is ready to conform because circumstances compel him. Jude, under the pressure to conform, dies. They feel “Our ideas were fifty years too soon to be any good to us” (200). The characters in the novel realize that
they are not customary characters and so they must suffer. They are restless characters suffering from psychological insecurities because of the conventional marriage forced upon them by the society. The society is so strong that their protest in the form of their assertion of independence irritates it. Then they receive only hard knocks from their society.

As the plot indicates, Hardy, in this last novel, has allowed the luxury of bringing into the open some themes of social criticism. He openly protests against the prevalent marriage system crippling the individual, against the prevalent class-consciousness that debar a poor student from entering Oxford, against forced conformity to social norms that break the free life of woman and against the inhuman treatment given to individuals that forces a genius like poor Jude to die. The novel may be described as the swan song to the untrammeled expression of what he really thought about certain Victorian prejudices and the consequent psychological disorientation and distortion in the personality of the individual. This is the most tragic consequence of social conformity against which the whole novel is a protest. Social ostracism and economic discrimination are also there but much more tragic is the psychological punishment. Sue reverts with pathological intensity to the conventional ideas of society and torments herself into a masochistic conformity. ‘O why should Nature’s law be mutual butchery!’ Sue exclaims. Phillotson’s reply is ‘Cruelty is the law pervading nature and society.’ (118)

Hardy always professed that it was no business of the chronicler of moods and deeds to express his personal views, yet he did, making the unrepentant Sue his mouthpiece:
When people of a later age look back upon the barbarous customs and superstitions of the times that we have the unhappiness to live in, what will they say! (250)

This is the ironic close to Hardy’s protest. The irony is intuitive and highly sensitive. It makes the reader think of what man has made of man. It is grinding and unconventional. This irony has made the novel very exciting. In the words of Carpenter, the novel has become “the most exciting of Hardy’s books because of its social criticism, its presentation of psychological malaise, and its unremitting irony”12 (139).

Philosophy has been there too long with Hardy. Now is the time to forget it for sometime and think of Hardy as the novelist of Protest.

References

2. F. Emily Hardy: The Early Life of Thomas Hardy, 1840 -1891, Macmillan Company, 1928.
4. Ibid.
7. F. Emily Hardy: The Early Life of Thomas Hardy, 1840 -1891, Macmillan, 1928.
8. Ibid.


