Title of Paper: **Breaking Victorian Taboos: 'Unwelcome Motherhood' and the Case of Thomas Hardy's Short Stories**

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Abstract: Thomas Hardy was a Victorian by birth and chronology, but his understanding of women and creation of strong female characters made him the precursor of feminist thought. His short stories only act as contrapuntal to his novels in their preoccupation with women and their tribulations as 'unwed' mothers but here motherhood is brought out from the peripheries of the plot to the very centre, treating each episode as a unique case study and thereby studying women as individuals not typecast as Victorian society and literature was habituated to do. This paper mainly studies, through intensive analysis of Hardy's Short stories, the trials and challenges that women face as 'unwed' mothers in a society which was unsparing in its ostracism of fallen women and light-lipped in its sexual morality, highlighting Hardy's humane treatment and his redemption of the blackest character with his loving-kindness even while truthfully portraying the often 'unnatural' treatment meted out to children by mothers in a society unaccommodating towards them.

Keywords: Motherhood, Victorian, unwelcome, illegitimate, abjection, society

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'Madam, forgive me!' said she,  
Sorrow bent,  
'A child – I soon shall bear him . . .  
Yes – I meant  
To tell you – that he won me ere he went.' (Poems 249)

These poignant lines from one of Hardy's poems reveal the sorrow and anxiety with which a woman awaits her approaching pregnancy because she is an unwed mother. It has been generally accepted that the greatest of wounds suffered by mankind comes to it as a result of romantic love. However, in Hardy's work, it is the woman who more often than not has to bear the pain and burden of the wounds all alone. Yet, was not the pattern of this pain ordained by the Judaeo-Christian God, as stated in the first book of The Old Testament?: 'Unto the woman, he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children . . .' (Bible 16) Thus, what is a universal reality is even more painfully true of the state of women burdened with unwelcome motherhood in Victorian society, no matter how much Victorian fiction tries to convince us that motherhood is a magical potion that makes a woman overflow with unconditional love the moment she gives birth to a child and makes her oblivious of the painful future that lies in wait for her and her child who has no right to a father's name. Although cursed to suffer the physical pain of childbirth since the exile from the Garden of Eden, motherhood became a source of mental anguish and emotional suffering for women who became mothers out of a purely sexual liaison, lacking the sanctified label of marriage. In Victorian England this ignominy and burden came upon the 'erring' woman with double force.

Despite this stark reality, motherhood, irrespective of the age or culture, has unanimously been regarded as the most fulfilling and momentous experience of a woman's life. Motherhood was couched in highly eulogistic language and given a place of honour in the Victorian age. The sole function of a woman was to become an exemplary mother to her children and motherhood was a woman's passport to social power and prestige. But this same age also saw the burgeoning of prostitution, the rise in the numbers of so-called 'fallen woman' and their obvious fallout – illegitimate children. Thus, it is evident that this society functioned on double standards. Women were worshipped as Madonnas if they became mothers within the sanctified institution of marriage, while for women who became mothers outside wedlock no consideration of the circumstances which had made them so, could save them from stigma and untold misery. Hardy, alert and sensitive to such double standards rampant in his society, did not fail to expose the practical and real face of motherhood through his novels and short stories. That motherhood is never so unqualified and happy an experience for women is borne out by the lot of Tess, Sue, Fanny Robin, and Lady
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Constantine, who are all unwed mothers. Their joy at becoming mothers, even if they were ready for experiencing it, is destroyed either by the mode in which they become mothers i.e., through male oppression, or because of the fear of social stigma. What has been treated with so much concern in Hardy's novels, finds a place in some of his short stories too. Ellen L. Sprechman, in her book Seeing Women as Men, celebrates Hardy's efforts to see women differently from the general Victorian mentality:

Although reared in the Victorian mentality, Hardy wrote at a time of great upheaval. . . . what Hardy did that was different from anyone before him was to fashion each of his novels around a strong, independent, charismatic woman at the same time that he painted weak, ineffectual men . . . (4-5)

What Sprechman celebrates as Hardy's unique contribution is the reversal of roles of hero and heroine and disengaging the words 'hero' and 'heroine' from their gendered connotations. She further points out Hardy's conscious opposition to the double standards of Victorian society and morality:

A woman who was seduced or raped, or in the worst scenario, had a child out of wedlock, was considered a fallen woman, whether or not she had consented to this action. . . . Hardy found this objectionable and set out to revise, by way of his books, society's standards of womanly behaviour (Sprechman 8).

Thus, we may compare Hardy, though not at the same level, with Dickens. If Dickens was a reformer aspiring to diminish the social iniquities of Victorian urban society, Hardy was a aspiring to reform the moral and sexual iniquities and sexual double standards of Victorian society. Hardy's portrayal of women, though often criticized for generalizations, sought to bring out their uniqueness and individuality, and championed their rights to be heard as individuals instead of being written-off merely as mothers and wives. Hardy dared to show that a woman had needs other than of being just a wife and mother; he gave her the voice to declare the value of love above the ignominies of a loveless marriage and refused to pass the sentence of 'fallen'-ness on her as easily as his society did.

In one of Hardy's short stories, 'The Marchioness of Stonehenge', the second tale in A Group of Noble Dames, the central female character, Lady Caroline, mates with a parish clerk's son who is much below her in social status. At the height of her passion she concludes a clandestine marriage with him while living under the pretence of being unwed. Gilmartin and Mengham suggest that Lady Caroline insists upon the secrecy so that 'she can enjoy a sexual relationship with her lover while not losing face socially' (67). Her passion spent, she painfully regrets having mated so much below her class. She humiliates her husband and sets off a series of chain reactions that end in his sudden death in her bedroom, during one of their many furtive night time trysts. She manages to cover up the mishap and in order to undo her secret marriage she manipulates
Milly Theale, the simple village lass who secretly loved the parish clerk, by convincing her to give out to the village that she [Milly] is the widow of the clerk. However, the Lady's plans of self-preservation fall through when she realizes that nature has not connived with her, nor absolved her of the bonds that she has socially contrived to cut off, when she understands much to her alarm that '. . . he is the father of this poor child that's coming to [her] . . .' (285). The burden of unwelcome motherhood comes upon Lady Caroline just when she has stifled her initial passion because of 'social considerations'. It is important to note that Lady Caroline, though she uses and exploits Milly throughout the story, is herself the victim of social considerations and pressure. It is the social set-up that ruins her and her ideas of happiness, of love and of satisfaction, which have been framed by generations of aristocratic pride. When she thinks to herself of 'how she, who might have chosen a peer of the realm, baronet, knight, or if serious-minded, a bishop or judge . . . could have brought herself to do a thing so rash as to make this marriage . . . ' (278), Lady Caroline is being childish and immature. She is not clear about what her true happiness consists in, nor does she understand what truly brings satisfaction in a woman's life: because true love and motherhood are the two basic ingredients to add fulfilment to a woman's life and Lady Caroline discards both without understanding their true worth. Later she does marry an aged, phlegmatic nobleman – the Marquis of Stonehenge – but there are no signs that she has found any happiness or fulfilment. The narrator tells us, 'she led a placid life with him' and that 'there was no child of the marriage' (p. 286).

Lady Caroline emerges as a sorry figure, who does not realize the enormity of her loss until very late in life. She is a victim of her upbringing, in a society that indoctrinated women to adhere to its dictates at the cost of their own happiness, consciously or unconsciously, and hence she realizes the vacuity of her hollow, titled life only when her own biological child points out to her the meaninglessness of her social position. She had been confident that 'her son would only too gladly exchange a cottage-mother for one who was a peeress of the realm . . .' (287-88). The cold kiss of her only child, his honest admission of his inability to love her as much as he loves his adoptive mother, takes away from her the very meaning of her life. The agony of being refused by her son and repentance for denying the love of her poor, yet upright, husband breaks Lady Caroline's illusions about the superiority of class and status. The adoptive bond proves to be stronger than the biological one. At the end of the tale, the Sentimental member observes: ‘Lady Caroline’s history afforded a sad instance of how an honest human affection will become shame faced and mean under the frost of class-division and social prejudices’ (289). Whatever our final impression of the Lady, the narrator says, 'she probably deserved some pity' (289), thus eliciting our sympathy and pointing out her status, ultimately, as that of a victim despite her role as victimizer of both her socially inferior husband and of Milly. In the final analysis, it would be inappropriate to end Lady Caroline’s story without mentioning Hardy’s anticipation of modern, twentieth century, psychological theories and studies involving motherhood by the sheer
force of his artistic intuition. If we study a few sentences in Ann Dally's interesting and enlightening book, *Mothers: Their Power and Influence*, we will realize how Hardy was far in advance of his times with respect to his superior understanding of female, especially maternal, psychology, as discussed in the previous chapter too. According to Dally, some mothers use their children merely for self-enhancement:

> Self-centred people are only aware of others in so far as they concern themselves. When they become mothers they organize their children to enhance their own looks, personalities or worldly success. Such a mother usually likes the idea of producing a child who will bring her credit. She is unaware of the needs of the child (87).

This description clearly fits Lady Caroline because we see that motherhood is not a natural instinct in her – she not only smuggled away her child to Milly but came to ‘. . . care little what became of them . . . ’ (286). Lady Caroline's interest in her son is aroused, many years later, only when the news of his ‘exceptional attainments’, his promotion, his dignified personal bearing, reach her ears and ‘it reawakened her maternal instincts, and filled her with pride’ (287).

Lady Caroline is an aristocrat and her superiority complex comes in the way of her attaining the fulfilment of motherhood. In this context, it would be appropriate to discuss the case of another aristocratic woman in the short stories, *Barbara of the House of Grebe*. Jeanette R. Shumaker, in an article on this story, makes an interesting study of the pseudo-scientific debates of the late-Victorian age. She says that Hardy’s ‘Barbara of the House of Grebe’ dramatizes the brutal consequences of the belief in the Victorian myth of degeneration that was harboured so intensely in the minds of the aristocracy. Degenerates, it was believed, supposedly passed on their flaws to their children ‘through a kind of Lamarckian evolution that increased aberrations with each succeeding generation. . . . protection of “the race” against decadence was sought through the ostracism of those who weren’t respectable . . . ’ (Shumaker 87). Shumaker also explores how current evolutionary theories, physics and medicine suggested models of entropy that made degenerationism seem plausible to Victorians. Although her essay explores the fear of degeneration among the aristocrats in ‘Barbara of the House of Grebe’, I would like to draw its instance to suggest that, like Barbara, Lady Caroline too demonstrates this upper class phobia of degeneration of class-traits in the story discussed in the preceding pages of this chapter. Lady Caroline’s early passion for her lowly born husband is similar to Barbara’s love for the working class Edmond. Both fall in love without a thought for their status and purely out of passion. However, both the ladies are gradually disillusioned with their humble unions. Shumaker Comments:

> Barbara’s overreaction to Edmond's disfigurement implies that, as an aristocrat, she had secretly attributed dreaded qualities to Edmond for a long time. Her gradual revulsion is implied through the narrator’s mocking description of her declining interest in Edmond after their wedding, and later through her lack of interest in his affectionate letters.
from Europe. . . . In Barbara’s mind, Edmond’s repulsive origins are what scar his once lovely face; she projects abjection and degeneracy upon him – poverty, loathsomeness, and death. . . . Sadly, his disfigurement causes her to project her fears about the degenerate working class onto him to the point of self-deceit about his character. (Shumaker 4-5)

The same applies to Lady Caroline who, we may assume, having imbibed similar ideas about abjection and degeneracy through her aristocratic birth and upbringing, rejects her humble and upright husband and indirectly drives him towards his untimely death. If we relate her mindset to what we have discussed just now in the preceding lines, it will be easy to explain her apparently insensitive behaviour. It is a kind of loathing and fear that the aristocrat feels for the lower class individual. Also, having realized her mistake about her choice of husband, her dereliction of maternal duty can also be explained. Lady Caroline probably feels that the child that will be born out of this mismatched union will have all the degenerate qualities of her lower class husband. The fear of social stigma of an unwed mother combines with the fear of the aristocrat of mothering a child that will humiliate her noble blood and superior traits. The case for the latter interpretation can strongly be argued as the latent fear seems to be the driving force behind her abandonment of her child. This fear reveals her lack of hope in the child, that it will eventually develop any qualities that will make the aristocratic parent proud, and is the potent reason for her being callous about the child's welfare. I say so because, later in life, Lady Caroline does show courage to admit her secret affair and her pregnancy. Lady Caroline's belatedly aroused maternal instincts are thus clearly connected with the sudden acquisition of the knowledge that her talented, noble, handsome son will bring her social recognition and credit and that he is no longer the cause of social stigma. She never bothered to become aware of the needs of the child that she had literally abandoned when it was just a tiny mite and even later, when he is a robust adult, she is still not concerned about his happiness. She insists on her biological claim on the boy and is foolishly confident that her social position will be a ready bait to wean her son away from the social-nonentity – Milly. In a way very much like Maria, the Lady Icenway, about whom we have discussed in chapter one, Lady Caroline tries to bank on her maternity, her ability to produce a healthy and handsome male child, at a point in her life when the fear of losing face has passed. The narrator is miserly in his description of Lady Caroline’s married life, but the sparseness of comments and their nature reveal that it is not happy or fulfilling. What we may also deduce, from the silence of the text, is the insult that Lady Caroline probably has had to bear because of her supposed ‘inability’ to bear a child to her geriatric second husband. Since infertility in men was scarcely admitted by society and motherhood was the only way of attaining prestige for married women, Lady Caroline’s eagerness to own up to the fruit of her past folly is perhaps her desperate attempt to prove that she is capable of producing a child, a way to appease her titled husband who, we can safely assume even if the text does not explicitly state it, must surely not be having
much affection for a wife who could give him no heir. Coming back once again to Shumaker’s discussion of abjection and degeneration, that is as much applicable to Lady Caroline’s story as to that of Barbara’s, we find, at the end of both the stories, that both the women are victims of their own misconceptions about degeneracy and, without their own knowledge, both have been reduced to abject status:

Barbara’s frequent, failed pregnancies suggest her new, abject status as a disgraced wife. Uplandtowers turns ‘the once radiant and passionate Barbara into a sickly woman condemned to a cowed life of repeated, unsuccessful pregnancies’ (Wing 88). That all but one of Barbara’s eleven babies die bolsters Hardy’s critique of her second marriage as debased (Shumaker 12).

In Lady Caroline’s case, when she proudly presents her aristocratic lineage and her present status of being a Marchioness as the passport to get back her son, we are reminded that her second marriage to a titled aristocrat, like Barbara’s, is debased and incapable of producing any offspring. Neither is it powerful enough as a bait to draw back her child from the lower class Milly. Thus, Lady Caroline is unconsciously reduced to the state of abjection by her child, who pays little heed to her aristocratic pedigree, and also to the humble origins of his adoptive mother, Milly.

Whatever their motives, and however selfish their actions, Hardy is not critical of his women characters because he, more than any other contemporary male writer, felt for the women of his time who were made to live such confined, strictly pre-defined and oppressed lives that in order to survive they often had to sacrifice the better half of their personalities and stoop to selfishness, pettiness and even cruelty. It is no wonder then that a society that made no allowance for genuine passion, nor measured out equal punishment for the same crimes to men and women, where illegitimate children and fallen women were the bane of humanity, would produce scheming women like Lady Caroline, Lady Icenway and Hetty Sorrel. These women, even if we admit that they are filled with innate selfishness, wish to deny or conceal or reject motherhood chiefly because their social instincts remind them of the horrors of unwed and illegitimate motherhood. Hardy subtly points out that we will never be in a position to pass an unqualified judgement on these mothers, about their alleged cruelty, unnaturalness, self-gratification and abandonment of their babies, without trying to conjecture what these women – who are hurled into maternity by accident – would have done or how they would have acted in an age and society different in time, space and nature. And if we raise this question within ourselves, then can we resist believing that these women – who in a different society may still have been unprepared and immature to handle their accidental and unwelcome pregnancies and may still have turned out to be unfit mothers – would perhaps not abandon their children or wish them dead if the fear factor of being socially ostracized was removed? Surely this much can be conjectured without much disagreement.
Lady Caroline is as much a victim of unwelcome motherhood as of the social prejudice prevalent in the upper echelons of English society, just as those women belonging to the lower rungs of society – Rhoda Brook, Car’line Aspent, Anna, and Mrs. Frankland – share the same burden of unexpected and unwelcome motherhood alongside masculine cruelty or oppression. In all these cases where the women belong to different classes – Rhoda, Car’line, Anna are from the lower strata of rural society, Leonara somewhere from the middle sections, while Lady Caroline belongs to the aristocracy – they seem to be united in their lot as being fellow sufferers and victims of masculine whims and fickle passions.

In yet another short story ‘The Fiddler of the Reels’ (Life’s Little Ironies), Mop Ollamoor’s almost diabolical and satanic music skills are shrewdly manoeuvred to arouse and then exploit Car’line sexually, who is then abandoned to fend for an illegitimate child even when we know that she is unfit to become a mother because she herself never seems to transcend her juvenile state to attain maturity during the whole course of the story, right till the very end. Motherhood is too great and complex a burden for her to be able to comprehend its implications and handle it, let alone experience it as the most fulfilling of all female experiences. Still absorbed in her immature self needs, Car’line is unperturbed even when her little girl is stolen from her by her one time seducer, Mop. Ned’s anxiety for the child, not his own, is not necessarily just a way of pointing at her insensitivity but Hardy as an artist deeply interested in the ‘melioration’ of society – both his and all human societies – is perhaps wanting to point out, time and again, that motherhood is and can be an ideal and enjoyable experience for a woman when she herself has attained both physical and mental maturity and has ‘chosen’ to become a mother and not been victimized by being forced to become one, that too in a society that did not pardon its women for such accidents. Hardy is never, not even for one moment, critical of women like Car’line because he felt it was Victorian society that was responsible for the production of such mothers. A prudish society that was tight-lipped when it came to healthy and frank knowledge about sex, about its implications and consequences, especially for its women, was bound to lead to such unwelcome pregnancies and Hardy protests against this, without being preachy, because he feels that such unprepared mothers cannot be good parents to their children.

Leonara Frankland is another case-study where Hardy underlines the masculine propensity to use women as mere objects of desire, as use-and-throw commodities, which may be freely disposed off and freely retrieved too. That is exactly what Millbourne tries to disguise as the prick of his ‘conscience’; it is his egotism that makes him feel that he has the power to atone for, or unmake, the wrongs done to a woman in the prime of her life, that too in a society so unforgiving towards women for such crimes of passion. The story of Leonara is based on a real-life incident of a seduced woman’s refusal to marry her lover,
who is repentant much later, and the narrator lends her as much dignity as a Tess.

That Hardy was full of admiration for such women who dared to refuse to become the slave and chattel of their erstwhile seducer is evident from his incorporation of an anecdote in his third-person autobiography (that was passed off, for many years, as Florence Hardy's biography of her novelist husband):

In December Hardy was told a story by Mrs Cross, a very old countrywoman he met, of a girl she had known who had been betrayed and deserted by a lover. She kept her child by her own exertions, and lived bravely and throve. After a time the man returned poorer than she, and wanted to marry her; but she refused. He ultimately went into the Union workhouse. The young woman's conduct in not caring to be 'made respectable' won the novelist-poet's admiration, and he wished to know her name; but the old narrator said, 'oh, never mind their names: they be dead and rotted by now' (*Life* 162-3).

As the victim of Millbourne's seduction, Leonara had to suffer alone. The tribulations, though left out of the narration, can very well be imagined, yet she remains unwilling to be victimized once again by her erstwhile lover's whimsical desire for a tardy atonement. She is very reasoned and logical in her refusal:

'I appreciate your motives, Mr. Millbourne; but you must consider my position; and you will see that, short of the personal wish to marry, which I don't feel, there is no reason why I should change my state, even though by doing so I should ease your conscience. My position in this town is a respected one, *I have built it up by my own labours*, and, in short, I don't wish to alter it...' [p. 422. My italics]

The italicized words emphasize the assiduous efforts of a single woman to attain respectability and honour in a society where women are vulnerable to physical and mental oppression by men. Leonara had to fight against the odds to turn the burden of illegitimate motherhood into the blessing of maternal joy, over the years. She not only wins our admiration, but retains it till the end. What is it then that forces her to give in to Millbourne's whims? Motherhood again. The maternal instinct that had given her the strength to build a secure life for her child years ago is now the weak point at which Millbourne breaks her defence. Leonara's daughter Frances is being courted by a young curate, the alliance is ripe but for some social disapproval arising out of their vocation as musicians. Millbourne uses his social position as the bait to lure the reluctant woman Leonara and who can overlook the clear authorial voice exposing Millbourne's triumph?: ‘By chance he had found the way to move her somewhat, and he followed it up. This view was imparted to Mrs. Frankland's daughter, and it led her to soften her opposition ...’ (p. 424). It is thus the welfare of her child that eggs on Leonara towards entrapment once more. The consequences are drastic and her outburst is both heart-wrenching and a pointer to the fact that maternal instinct makes women weak:
‘Why did you come and disturb my life a second time? . . . why did you show yourself in my world again, and raise this scandal upon my hard-won respectability – won by such weary years of labour as none will ever know!’ She bent her face upon the table and wept passionately. (427)

There is also bitter, but veiled, criticism directed against men who always think that women are dependent on them and female self-sufficiency is either disdainfully treated or unimaginable to them. Millbourne searches out Leonara with the deep-seated male assurance that his desertion had surely left the woman absolutely in shambles, but he is quite unprepared to find mother and daughter leading ‘highly creditable’ (p. 421) lives and even when he finds that they ‘require no help of any sort’ (p. 422), he still intrudes under a plea for his conscience’s sake.

The story clearly shows that the desire to oppress, victimize and trap women is latent in men and Millbourne’s egoistic desire to do the right thing for the wrong motive brings no good to anyone. It is only when he finds that his ego is not placated and no one is eulogizing him for his actions, that he gives up with the belated realization: ‘I have learnt that there are some derelictions of duty which cannot be blotted out by tardy accomplishment . . .’ (430). And the burden of heavy thought that he lives with thereafter is a fit punishment for his desertion of a woman, leaving her to fight the critical eye of the world for deeds in which he had an equal share.

Another victim of male desire and desertion is Anna in ‘On the Western Circuit’, belonging to the group of stories called Life’s Little Ironies. Anna’s seducer, Charles Raye, never intends to develop any serious or committed attachment with her; she is purely a pleasure trip for him, a haven of repose on the way to work. Anna, like Car’line, is portrayed as a child-woman who never reaches the stage of maturity. She is juvenile, under the tutelage of her childless mistress Edith. That Edith is a mother-surrogate to her is evident from the narrator’s comment: ‘. . . being without children [Edith] had wished to have [Anna] near her in preference to anybody else . . .’ (457-458).

At one point, Edith and Anna's relationship is transformed into that of female rivalry, at least on Edith’s part. Edith secretly yearns that Anna’s child with Raye were her own; but very soon, her yearning changes as Anna’s helpless condition rouses the latent, frustrated maternal instinct within her. The thought of Anna’s physical and mental ruin, the inevitable consequence of her unwed pregnancy, perturb her so much that she writes a moving letter to Raye which dissuades him from dereliction of duty and responsibility towards Anna. Motherhood once again emerges in another light as Edith represses her love for Raye, which should have urged her to prevent such a disastrous match which would doom his life, and she tacitly teams up with her maid Anna to bring Raye to the altar of a ruinous marriage:

‘O – Poor fellow, poor fellow!’ mourned Edith Harnham. Her distress now raged as high as her infatuation. It was she who had wrought him to this
pitch – to a marriage which meant his ruin; yet she could not, in mercy to her maid, do anything to hinder his plan . . . (p. 471)

Hardy has here cleverly juxtaposed two women from two different sections of society, placed them on the same platform, to show how motherhood or the possibilities of motherhood affect them differently. Edith’s frustrated maternal affections go out to the uneducated and nubile Anna and she literally fights with herself and the world to secure for Anna’s unborn child a legitimate future even if it entails a life of guilt and misery for her as she pushes the man she loves into a marriage that is akin to a lifelong imprisonment. When Edith had earlier agreed to be Anna’s amanuensis, what Edith does for Anna was not mere charity; rather, the words of the text – ‘The luxury of writing to him what would be known to no consciousness but his was great, and she had indulged herself therein’ (467) – suggest Edith’s need to attempt a foray into a passionate life that her marriage had never been able to provide as it had left her ‘still a woman whose deeper nature had never been stirred’ (467). The frustration is so great and the unhappiness so profound that at one point she almost adulterously wishes: ‘I wish his child was mine – I wish it was!’ (469) What an irony! For one woman, the forthcoming motherhood is a cause for alarm and embarrassment while for the other it is a blessing forbidden and denied. Edith and Anna are both victims of a patriarchal social order that either treats women as sexual objects or denies a passionate life to them. It is interesting in this context to make a note of what Martin Ray has to say about the textual changes Hardy had to make in the serial versions of the short story. In order to escape the scathing criticism of the Victorian public: ‘Illegitimacy and vicarious infidelity was bowdlerized for the serial versions, with Edith becoming a respectable widow and Anna merely a young maiden pining for her lover in London’ (Ray 201). In the collected edition however, while Anna is left on the verge of social calumny by one man’s amorousness, Edith has been pushed into a life of unhappiness by society. The narrative voice is evidently critical and sarcastic when it says:

Influenced by the belief of the British parent that a bad marriage with its aversions is better than free womanhood with its interests, dignity, and leisure, she had consented to marry the elderly wine-merchant as a pis aller, at the age of seven-and-twenty - . . . to find afterwards that she had made a mistake. (467)

But the mistake cannot be rectified and thus all three are left to suffer: Charles like a ‘galley slave’, Anna the child-mother, and Edith the frustrated, lonely and childless woman.

Rhoda Brook, the rejected mistress of Farmer Lodge in ‘A Withered Arm’ (Wessex Tales), occupies a singular position in the entire gamut of Hardy’s short stories. From the beginning she is depicted as a mysterious woman: ‘. . . a thin fading woman of thirty milked somewhat apart from the rest’ (52). What has passed between Rhoda and Lodge is never mentioned, but we are told: ‘[he] ha’n’t spoke to Rhoda Brook for years’. (53) That she was once his mistress,
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whom he had used sexually and emotionally, is clear; but he seems to have chosen to sever all ties with her eventually. Even the illegitimate child that resulted from his union with Rhoda is ignored by him. A victim of brusque abandonment by Lodge, burdened with unwelcome motherhood, and forced to choose a life of aloofness in order to escape the jeers of the villagers, Rhoda vents her harshness on her child and later directs her jealousy towards Lodge’s beautiful young wife Gertrude. Rhoda’s difficult life as discarded mistress and unwed mother had hardened her so much that her natural impulses are completely frozen, which even motherhood is unable to soften. Being an unwelcome responsibility, Rhoda’s relationship with her child is devoid of warmth and affection and is very uncomfortable. She uses her boy as an instrument to escalate her sexual rivalry with Gertrude. Kristin Brady makes an insightful study of the boy suffering the consequences of a neglectful and cold upbringing:

The child’s overwhelming solitariness is the result of his unnatural relationship with his parents. His mother puts a clean shirt on him for church, but never, either by word or gesture, demonstrates affection for him; his father is indifferently irked by his presence, but never acknowledges his existence (Brady 26).

Brady also argues that neglect in maternal duty and lack of affection are the cause of his sad end at the scaffold. Rhoda’s role as a mother is never for once focussed upon in the story; the very absence of the mother-child relationship from the story is a pointer towards the abnormal state of things and a critique of male appetites that result in such outcomes. In fact, however unfair it may seem, the boy is not used in the tale as anything more than ‘the symbol of Rhoda’s union with Lodge’ (Brady 27). It is sad that it is only at his death that the boy finally has both his ‘irked and disgruntled’ parents united, while the childless Gertrude is shoved aside as an intruder in this ‘family reunion’. While it is correct to see Rhoda as the victim of male oppression, it is also necessary to point out that the apathy and repressed sense of betrayal that she harbours in her heart all her life, is unjustly directed towards her child who is as much a victim as herself.

Rhoda’s neglect and lack of nurture of her son ultimately turn the boy into a melancholy lonesome figure, resulting from an unhappy childhood, one untaught about the ways of society and its dangers, who meets an untimely and wasteful end. It is interesting to note how indifferent to and oblivious of the boy’s tendencies Rhoda is, as early in the story we see him ‘cutting a notch with his pocket-knife in the beech-backed chair’ which according to Kristin Brady points to his ‘recklessness’ and ‘encourages his poaching’ activities (Brady 26). In any case, we may at least say that it is Rhoda’s nonchalance about the child, and her tacit encouragement to him to continue poaching, which fails to warn him of the dangers of the consequences of such social crimes. Gilmartin and Mengham clearly state that ‘. . . there is plenty of evidence to show why the boy’s being on the spot when the rick was fired would not have been “by chance” ’(16). They also go on to suggest that the reluctance of the boy to go out to the fields and
farms for regular work can be traced to his aversion to the taunts and ridicule of society as an illegitimate child. Segregated from society, from the family of Farmer Lodge and from the source of normal livelihood, the boy is taught to survive through dangerous activities, which ultimately push him towards an untimely end. At one point in the story Rhoda says ‘the hare you wired is very tender; but mind that nobody catches you’ (78), which shows both her awareness of and encouragement of the boy’s poaching activities, but at the same time brings into the purview the important issue of penury which Rhoda and the illegitimate child have been pushed to by the boy's neglectful father. Thus, though the boy’s presence at the rick-burning may have been accidental, his ignorance of the dangers and the consequences may be attributed to an unhealthy and improper mother-child relationship, which is in turn the tragic outcome of a man’s refusal to take responsibility for his actions, for his own child.

Nancy J. Chodorow makes a survey of feminist opinions on maternal isolation in child-rearing that will help illustrate the mental landscape of Rhoda and of her nameless boy. As Chodorow points out: '[T]he isolation of responsibility she [i.e. the mother] faces... shows that isolation helps lead to her desolation, rage and destructiveness’ (Chodorow 81) This suppressed ‘desolation, rage and destructiveness’ in Rhoda is subtly revealed in the story in her physical isolation from the rest of the villagers, her suppression of words and emotions, and her unnatural relationship with her son. This suppressed anger, understandably the outcome of the injustice that she has suffered at the hands of Lodge, does not end with her but gets new life in her son. The lack of natural love and affectionate nurture has produced in the growing boy a repressed sense of deprivation, a feeling of being unwanted, thereby giving rise to a propensity perhaps to unconsciously perambulate towards all things anti-social, like being present at the rick-burning. Thus, the story ends with poetic justice for him, even as he is hanged for a crime perhaps not committed by him, as he avenges himself against both his parents for his harsh upbringing – his neglectful parents, for the first and last time in the course of the story, come together belatedly to acknowledge him as their son.

Thus, Rhoda’s unwelcome maternity never sows the seeds of that love and sacrifice (which are generalized in most societies as the pre-requisites for being a ‘good’ mother) in her – which Victorian society took so much for granted and generalized as being the emotions that supposedly emerge spontaneously with motherhood. Hardy once again exposes the fallacy inherent in such generalized images of women, mothers, and motherhood, and shows that we have to allow individual idiosyncrasies (and circumstances) free play. Rather than framing generalizations, or trying to fit women into moral and social straitjackets and criticizing any deviance, Hardy time and again seems to argue for the need to give women the chance to mature and be ushered into motherhood gracefully; only then can they come close to being what the Victorian social psyche assumed in its idealization of mothers.
Hardy anticipates modern day psychoanalysts and psychologists, who have the advantage of advanced scientific methods and clinical case-studies at their disposal to formulate their theories, in describing so much about motherhood with the mere aid of artistic vision and intuition. Modern studies of maternal psychology indicate that the forcible institutionalization of motherhood is unhealthy for children (Bernard 14). In the case of Rhoda, the negative impact is stronger as her maternity is unwelcome; the responsibility for her child rests entirely on her shoulders. The annoyance and irritation of bringing up a child that one did not wish to have in the first place, or one who constantly reminds her of her exploitation by a man whom she had probably loved at one time, is meted out to the child in turn – in place of wholesome motherly love. Simone de Beauvoir argues that anyone who is able to gauge the pressure, pain and burden that mothers undergo to fulfil their duties may be shocked to come face to face with the conscious or unconscious desires and rebellious wishes they harbour, and be alarmed that defenceless infants are put under the sole care of such persons (Beauvoir 485). Lois Bethe Schoenfield, in her singular work *Dysfunctional Families in the Wessex Novels of Thomas Hardy*, points out that in Hardy's novels there is only a passing reference to children and they are scarcely used for more than background material (109). She says that bad parenthood does not prepare children for a stable family life in adulthood. The picture that Hardy drew in his novels, and short stories, is one where unhappy childhoods and unhappy marriages abound (Schoenfield 112).

Hardy's treatment of unwed mothers and its corollary, illegitimate children, is indicative of his society's intolerance of such sections of humanity. In most of his novels the children born are illegitimate: Fanny Robin's nameless baby, in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, Tess's baby Sorrow, the nameless son born to Viviette and Swithin, in *Two on a Tower*, Sue's children with Jude – as marriage under common law made their children illegitimate. Most of them die because 'all classes believed that an illegitimate child born in the nineteenth century to an unwed mother was better off dead' (Schoenfield 117). While we have mothers like Rhoda Brook whose unwelcome motherhood fails to arouse affection for her child, there is the contrast in the most famous case of Tess's doomed illegitimate son, Sorrow. Although Tess pretends not to love this baby, because he is a constant reminder to her of her plight at the hands of Alec, but in reality she does. One evening when she returns from the field and finds her baby taken ill, she is sorely grieved. Aware that her child will not live long, Tess baptizes him herself, in the famous midnight ritual. As expected, the frail creature ends the battle for life very soon after this and the narrator tells us: 'So passed away Sorrow the Undesired – that intrusive creature, that bastard gift of shameless Nature who respects no social law' (*Tess* 100). It is as if Hardy did not allow this 'creature' of 'shameless Nature' to exist in this society. In a way Sorrow is spared the terrible fate that befalls Rhoda's unnamed, illegitimate son who ends his life wastefully at the scaffold. In surviving childhood Rhoda's son is close to two of Hardy's characters in the novels who are illegitimate, and yet are...
allowed to attain adulthood: Manston in *Desperate Remedies* and William Dare in *A Laodicean*. Schoenfield comments:

They may each appear as villain in their stories. They have each been formed by their lack of ‘a proper parental relationship’ during the impressionable years of their childhoods. . . . the social and economic stigma of illegitimacy in a capitalist society was a reason for worry both by the child and the mother (Schoenfield 118).

Seen in this light, what does the future hold for the child of Charles Raye and Anna on ‘On the Western Circuit’? A bleak one because the tragic note with which the journey of their married life begins can only forebode deterioration of marital relations and an unhappy home for the child. However, we must not forget to mention at this point that Hardy did not always equate unwelcomeness with an unwed mother, but he did try to show the tribulations that lie in wait for an unwed mother in his society. There were some women who were so oppressed by these that they neither relished the joys of motherhood nor fulfilled the responsibility towards the life that they had brought into the world but there were others who suffered, yet were full of compassion and protectiveness towards their babies. As pointed out by Natalie J. MacKnight, one of George Eliot’s creations, Hetty Sorrel, exemplifies the community’s indoctrination of the woman’s mind with the need to remain respectable at every cost. It is this, alongside her self-love, that are, MacKnight argues, what drive Hetty to criminally abandon her unwelcome baby. ‘She can face abandoning an infant to its death more easily than she can face shocking her community with her illegitimate child’ (MacKnight 120). Also, I think that Hetty’s dislike of her baby and her honest confessions about feeling it to be a heavy burden pulling her downwards to her doom, if read without filtering it though the Victorian code of maternal ethics and generalized valorisation of motherhood, is easy to understand in terms of twentieth-century women’s vocal protests against the pressures of motherhood. The language of maternal discontent so tabooed in Victorian England came out into the open in the next century in the writings of women all over the world. In *A Proper Marriage*, Doris Lessing describes her heroine experiencing the tribulations of mothering:

What is it all about? Asked Martha in despair. She was furious with herself for losing her temper. She could have wept with annoyance. She was saying to herself as she wiped up the milk and grey pulp; oh Lord, how I hate this business, I do loathe it so. She was saying how she hated her daughter; and she knew it. Soon the hot anger died; guilt unfailingly succeeded . . . ‘My poor unfortunate brat, what have you done to deserve a mother like me?’ (Lessing 149).

Thus – like George Eliot – Hardy too, without of course shocking the sentiment of the Victorian reader, in his short stories does subtly hold up the picture of mothers who writhe under the very demanding institution of motherhood. There are mothers who are ushered into maternity again and again without their
‘deeper natures [being] stirred’. The irritation or apathy that Rhoda, Ella Marchmill, or Eliot’s Hetty feel towards their children is not only pardonable but wholly acceptable as human frailty.

Jessie Bernard argues that what we term as ‘maternal instinct’ is not reproductive reflexes but rather the more psychological and social aspects of motherhood. She argues that it is this social pressure or force that produces nurturing behaviour in mammalians in the very presence of a child. She makes an interesting point when she points out that for many women holding a baby may be highly enjoyable or desirable but they may not be enthusiastic or willing to assume full responsibility for it (Bernard 10). She further argues that since sexuality and parenthood have been separated, it is an indication of the fact that childbirth is logically accepted by society as being unwelcome at many times. It is no wonder then that some women may feel fulfilled by, and enthusiastic about, motherhood while some may feel it to be a burden; and there is no reason to make the latter type feel guilty because motherhood is a socially injected, namely, external imposition and not biologically essential to a woman’s health, longevity or physical welfare (Bernard 23).

The polar opposite of these mothers who harbour discontent for their ‘unwelcome’ and burdensome children, are women like George Moore’s Esther Waters, in the eponymous novel, who stand undaunted in the face of approaching motherhood even when the man has abandoned her. Esther’s conversation with her mistress Mrs. Barfield is both striking and singular. She tells her mistress: ‘... I can no longer think of myself. There is another to think for now.’ When Mrs. Barfield exclaims about her sorry plight, Esther patiently replies with courage and conviction:

‘And only twenty! Oh, like you, it is a shame! May God give you courage to bear up in your adversity!’
‘I know there is many a hard time before me, but I have prayed for strength, and God will give me strength, and I must not complain. My case is not so bad as many another; I have eight pounds. I shall get on, ma’am...’ (Moore 88).

Also there is the case of Elizabeth Gaskell’s Ruth who looks upon her coming illegitimate child as God’s sign that He has not abandoned her. The knowledge of her approaching motherhood not only cures Ruth of her suicidal impulses, but the narrator almost equates the birth of her child with the holy birth of Christ the Saviour.

Hardy is not critical of those women who are subsumed by social pressures, but he never fails to elevate the stature of the women who try to make the best of the unwelcome situation. All discussions on unwed mothers and illegitimacy will remain incomplete if we do not go back to Hardy’s strong views that he put forward through his New Woman, Sue Bridehead, who questions an individual’s right to bring children into the world without considering the financial and social consequences and also estimating the capabilities of the parents to give the child a good life. She says: ‘it seems such a terribly tragic
thing to bring beings into the world – so presumptuous – that I question my right to do it sometimes!' (Jude 264). Thus, a child born to an unwed woman is understandably unwelcome because it has to suffer the consequences of the irresponsible pleasure-seeking of two adults. Hardy seems to question again and again: if the pleasure was shared by both, then why is the burden of the shame and guilt only the woman’s? If the mistake was committed by the man too, then why does the woman have to suffer alone? Why should the child born out of the mistake of its parents be victimized by the social mores? We do not get answers for these questions, but what impresses us in Hardy’s stories and novels is the courage and conviction with which he raises these issues time and again and not for once does his loving-kindness desert his female characters; for he knows the blights and hardships that a single, unwed mother suffers in the Victorian society. This is a feeling which Hardy has voiced lyrically, in one of his poems about a woman, a coquette, who learns it the hard way by paying the price for her coquetries:

At last one pays the penalty –
The woman – women always do.
My farce, I found, was tragedy
At last! – One pays the penalty
With interest when one, fancy free,
Learns love, learns shame. . . . Of sinners two
At last \textit{one} pays the penalty –
The woman – women always do! (Comp. Poems 139).

What these poignant lines once again highlight and throw back at a society based on sexual double-standards, is the question: why is it that the woman always has to pay the penalty?

Hardy’s artistic vision extraordinaire which was far in advance of his times and far more humane than his society or his contemporaries. In none of the short stories do we find any stereotypical characterization nor any shallow generalizations about how women react to their unwelcome pregnancies. Shanta Dutta, in her milestone work on Hardy’s ambivalent attitude to women, says:

In 1906 Hardy expressed his view that the father of a woman’s child was entirely her own business, and Sue anticipates Hardy by a decade when she declares to Jude that, ‘in a proper state of society, the father of a woman’s child will be as much a private matter of hers as the cut of her under-linen, on whom nobody will have any right to question her’ (Dutta 127).

One reason why Hardy is so sympathetic towards his women, even the blackest of the lot, is probably because he was critical of his society which unjustifiably cast out unwed mothers from home and respectable society and hounded them all their lives. Hardy harboured the vision of a society which would judge women through different parameters and not brand them with the labels of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, merely based on their sexual choices or accidents. He was always critical,
though not always polemical about it, of patriarchal assumptions about women and motherhood which inevitably cornered them and drove them towards unjust sufferings. Hardy, often, was able to show how the oppression of women leads to the creation of unviable progeny and incapacitated mothers. For example, the very traumatic experience of Barbara, in the eponymous short story, of being forced by her tyrannical second husband to view the deliberately disfigured statue of her first husband, results in a certain psychosomatic biological malfunctioning leading to repeated miscarriages. Finally Barbara gives birth to a listless daughter and the reader is made apprehensive that the little girl will only repeat her mother’s tale of victimization by a tyrannical patriarchal figure. Thus, we see that Barbara has a series of pregnancies during her life span but she fails to really experience or cherish the healthy joys and fulfilment of motherhood.

At this point it would not be inappropriate to state that Hardy’s short stories, poems and novels hold up as a recurrent leitmotif the imbalances inherent in the situation of male and female functions, roles and responsibilities with regard to reproduction. His sympathy for women rarely falters because he, beyond any other writer of his time, felt that in the sexual relationship and its outcome the scales were always tilted towards the man’s side and the male always had the upper hand. Dorothy Dinnerstein’s views on the vital difference between motherhood and fatherhood to help us understand the reason behind Hardy’s unqualified sympathy for women and his basic point that however ‘unwelcome’ a child was for a woman, she never had the same liberty of disowning it as did the biological father. Dinnerstein writes:

The imbalance in an immediate sense is that, though both are vulnerable, his situation is by and large much easier to slip out of, psychologically, than hers is. The difference, of course, is that if he betrays her it is because he is choosing not to be emotionally a parent on that occasion, while this is a choice that she, regardless of who does not betray whom, is less free to make. It is easier, in other words, for him to impregnate her and then dodge the emotional significance of fatherhood than it is for her to get pregnant and then dodge the emotional significance of motherhood. Even in case (and these are still rare) in which she avails herself of freely accessible abortion and feels no conscious heaviness of heart, what she is refusing to let herself feel solemn about is a process that is going on in her own body, not in someone else’s...

(Dinnerstein 152) {My italics}

Such still rare cases of women are found in Hardy's fiction, but not too many. Arabella is the only woman who, after she has successfully trapped Jude into marriage, probably aborts the coming child with the help of country remedies suggested by the quack-physician Vilbert – a stratagem that has tragic consequences for the seduced and deserted young girl in Hardy’s poem ‘A Sunday Morning Tragedy’. And in the rest of Hardy’s fiction, we see this inability of the woman to shrug off this psychological and emotional bonding with a being...
that has been born out of her, no matter how inconvenient and unwelcome for her. This is a concept that Margaret Mead elaborates in her interesting essay ‘Fatherhood is a Social Invention’ (Qtd. in Dinnerstein 152). Here Mead argues that though parenthood remains optional, relatively, in modern times, even then its emotional meaning remains in some irreducible way harder for woman to side-step than for man. This, according to Hardy, is the true reason for the victimization of women. It is this which is their Achilles’ heel that nature has devised for them and one through which motherhood does, at times, become a bane for women’s struggle for equality with men and their bid for individuality.

Some recent researches and scholarly discourses on motherhood by feminist thinkers have revealed a link between motherhood and madness. Marilyn Yalom points out the role of feminist scholars in introducing new perspectives on the role of mothers in shaping the mental lives of their children and in having their own mental lives shaped by the experience of mothering. She appreciates the role of these scholars in revealing the fact that motherhood has become such an oppressive social institution that it undermines the mother’s mental health and creates children who are ambivalent towards their own mothers (Yalom 4-5).

This is especially true of women who become mothers without any choice of their own. Hardy, like these feminist scholars, believed that motherhood as an ideal institution ought to change in order to retain the sanity of mothers and to create a healthy mother-child bond. In his short stories, Hardy shows the negative consequences of unprepared-for or unwelcome motherhood in a society that put the entire responsibility of child-rearing on such unwilling women. The Rhodas, the Annas or the Carolines, cannot ever experience the fulfilment of motherhood nor will their children share a special bond with their mothers because they have not been born out of a yearning for motherhood but merely by accident or incidentally. However, the ambivalence of these women towards their own flesh-and-blood is sympathetically and subtly treated by Hardy in his shorter fiction.

Endnotes:


ii Thomas Hardy, ‘The Marchioness of Stonehenge’, A Group of Noble Dames, in The Collected Short Stories of Thomas Hardy, ed. Desmond Hawkins (London: Macmillan, 1988). Future references to the short stories are to this edition and page numbers will be parenthetically included in the text.
iii Shumaker explains the concept of ‘abjection’ using Julia Kristeva’s definition in her famous essay, ‘Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection’. Kristeva describes the abject as “the not-I”. Kristeva’s theory explains racial, class, gender, national, and religious hatreds. Shumaker says: ‘Degenerationism is one manifestation of the tendency to label “others” as abject; degenerationism was used by some well-heeled Victorians to justify acting upon their hatred of those whom they saw as abject’, p. 3.

Work Cited


