Chapter V

Conclusion

Thomas Hardy is often maligned by feminist readers for his portrayal of women who are punished for their refusal to submit to the patriarchal law. However, far from reasserting anti-feminist notions of women and womanhood, Hardy uses his heroines to challenge the patriarchal structuring of a society that does not recognize women's words, women's passions or women's possibilities. Bathsheba, Betty Dornell *(Noble Dames*), Sally and Lizzy (*Wessex Tales*) and Leonora (*Life's Little Ironies*) are some of Hardy's heroines, who confront the issues of language, sexuality and marriage from a feminist perspective, and force the reader to recognize the artificiality of the systems which uphold man as the centre of a society in which a woman is "the other." Within *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *Tess of the D' Urbervilles*, *Jude the Obscure*, *Wessex Tales, A Group of Noble Dames* and *Life's Little Ironies,* subversive voices speak up against the stereotypes within which women are contained and break down the "letter" of patriarchal laws which artificially characterize women as "sexless" and needy of a husband and his blanket of financial security. The heroines of these texts speak out against the sexist language, the stereotype of the "pure woman"

and the necessity of marriage. Although they are eventually silenced, their voices have been heard and the reader must recognize their right to speak and to live independent of patriarchal laws.

This struggle, among women, for recognition and acceptance and the right for equality with men owes a great deal to Mary Wollstonecraft, who in her book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), raised her voice against the discriminatory standards of education and behaviour for women, in comparison to men. She argued that feminity was a construct and that women were born equal to men but were taught to be their subordinates. Wollstonecraft drew inspiration from the French Revolution's agenda of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. In the United States, the Abolitionist Movement against slavery triggered off an organization for women who identified their situation with that of the slaves. Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton made possible the first ever Women's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls in 1848. Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, Antoinette Brown and others came together to form the United National American Women's Suffrage Association. They fought for reforms in Women's Suffrage. J.S. Mill, a noted social thinker, presented a petition for the Women's Suffrage Bill. In his book, *The Subjection of Women* (1869), Mill supported women's equal rights movement in work, education, property and suffrage.

In late nineteenth century, the Marxist analysis of human history and society proved relevant for the feminist. Engel in his *The Origins of Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) showed how the emergence of private property in history, resulted in the subordinate position assigned to women. Feminists like Clara Zetkin, Ossip, Lily Braun in Germany and Alexandra Kollontai in Soviet Russia struggled for women's rights including the need for household cooperatives, right to contraception and abortion, free education and divorce. In America and Europe, women eventually succeeded in attaining the right to vote by the beginning and the middle of the twentieth century. Further, legal gains concerning marriage, child custody and entry into professions were also granted to women. There was a disappearance of the feminist movement for quite some time, once the suffrage was achieved. However, the movement was reawakened in 1960 with the publication of Simone de. Beauvoir's book, *The Second Sex* in 1949 and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963.

Feminist criticism appeared as a critical theory in Literature in the late 1960s. Its objective was to describe and interpret women's experience by eroding various misconceptions regarding traditional images and conventional roles of women. It aimed at re-reading texts to determine the extent to which they reveal a feminist consciousness. It

assisted women writers to recognize their potential and find their position in the field of literature by relating to each other through a subculture. Kate Millet's book *Sexual Politics* (1969) advocated the need to challenge the traditional author/reader relation where the reader grasped the text as a passive being. *Sexual Politics* along with *Thinking about Women* (1968) by Mary Ellman encouraged the "Images of women" line of criticism. This is a reaction against the incorrect representation of women through false images or female stereotypes. Cheri Register, another feminist critic put forward a demand for strong, independent, self reliant but authentic women who can act as role models for women in actual life. These critics objected to the female polarization of goddess or whore, angel or demon that served the purpose of patriarchy. They also dismissed patriarchal mythologies of romantic love and of motherhood, viewing both as hampering the growth of women as individuals. They aimed at locating instances of misogyny and misrepresentation of women.

From 1975 onwards, the critical attention shifted from "feminist critique" to gynocriticism, that is, from the works of male writers to those of female writers. It was proposed to discover a history of tradition among women writers based upon their common experience both inside and outside the literary fields. Ellen Moer's *Literary Women* (1976),

Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of their Own* (1977) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979) appeared as major studies in this context.

Divergence in the feminist criticism can be traced in the form of relativist and essentialists positions held by feminists. Relativists who are generally Anglo-Americans view that there is no difference between men and women's writing. According to them, the specific concerns of the white middle class heterosexual women writers represent the narrative of all women. The essentialist position held by French feminists on the contrary, highlights the difference between men and women as well as within women themselves based on class, linguistically 'woman' is a sign not an essence. They emphasize the difference between the signifier and signified. Deconstructionists or post-structuralists feminists aim to deconstruct the centre or the masculine construction of reality in the conceptual system of language.

Deconstructionist or post-structuralists criticism holds a special relevance to Hardy's texts. The general trend of the critics in the past had been to judge Hardy's fiction by traditional canon of realism. They praised Hardy as a tragic humanist-realist of Wessex. The contradictions, the interplay of various voices within Hardy's narrative were almost ignored. Post-Sructuralists or Post-Modernists, however, could locate

fissures in the textuality of Hardy's fiction. In his 1895 Preface to the first edition of *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy mentioned that his novels are a "series of seemings" or "personal impressions." The Post-Modernists approach also rejects the claims of those critics who declare Hardy as "anti – feminist" or a misogynist. These critics ignore the simultaneous presentation of Hardy whose sensibility or consciousness was moulded to a certain degree by the feminist uproar of the times.

The mid-nineteenth century, when Hardy started writing was a disturbed phase of sifting values and beliefs. Industrialization had started rearing its ugly head in the form of urban poverty and unemployment. The competitive nature of commerce brought insecurity to many and the gulf between the private and public spheres increased in the middle class bourgeoisie families. The world of home and domesticity was idealized and the responsibility for both was given to women. Women were thus taught to experience satisfaction and fulfillment in the performance their roles a wife, mother, sister and daughter. Conventional Victorian ideology suppressed a woman's sexuality and sexual reticence was adopted even by media and publishing houses. The novelists of this period were curbed by the constant fear of censorship and bans by editors of magazines and the lending libraries.

The mid-Victorian novelists, hence, took added care to keep their women characters within the acceptable standards of society and literary tradition. Women's main concern was depicted as marriage, love, home and family. Deviation from the set standards of morality inevitably led to authorial punishment. Sex and sexuality in women characters was totally ignored by the novelists. Mrs Henrywood, in her bestselling novel – *East Lynne* (1861), reserves a fate of moral retribution for the heroine who breaks the marriage code to join her lover. Mrs Gaskell's *Ruth* endorses the guilt and suffering of its heroine who had fallen sexually, hence, morally. The novel also conveys that a fallen woman can be accepted back into society only if she undergoes purgatory through a life of moral purity and asceticism.

Charles Dickens in his novels, *Great Expectations* and *Dombey and Son* depicts women polarized as the chaste or depraved, virgins or whores. Thackeray criticizes marriage in his novels which is undertaken for the sake of convenience. But his novels lack the psychological depth in his women characters. Thematically, George Eliot's novels, deal with the unsuccessful marriages of her women characters and her desire to support these characters with feminist sensibilities. In *The Mill on the Floss*, for example, Eliot moulds the character of her unconventional heroine Maggie into that of a morally, pure selfless character, who rejects

her feelings and chooses to suffer at the end. Moreover, sexual, reticence, practiced by Eliot, keeping in mind the prudery of the age blocks a clear view of the dilemma and suffering of her characters as seen in *Daniel Deronda* and *Middlemarch*. Though Eliot in her novels condemns the prevalent social ideologies regarding women, she fails to seriously challenge the society responsible for such ideologies. Charlotte Bronte was more advanced than her contemporaries, voicing the need to recognize the intrinsic worth of her women characters. In *Jane Eyre*, the heroine struggles to be accepted for herself and in *Shirley* the central woman character is unconventional and rebellious.

Generally, the Mid-Victorian novelists were unable to question, in radical terms, the basic assumptions of a society that suppressed women and denied them the freedom to be themselves. But, by the end of the nineteenth century, a gradual, progressive change in the outlook of society became noticeable and evident. French realists like Zola and Flaubert and, also, Ibsen, the playwright, began to assert considerable influence on the English fiction and awakened it to the hypocrisy of an artificial presentation of the female self. Hence, an openness, previously frowned upon, descended on Victorian society. Sex was discussed in public and resulted in a deeper probing into the psychological complexities of women. English writers turned to a direct and realistic

analysis of love, marriage and sex. In other words, morality was redefined in fresh terms. A number of novels depicting strong, independent and unorthodox women appeared on the scene. These novels attacked the norms and conventions of a social system that curbed the individual growth of women. Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), Iota's, *A Yellow Aster* (1894), Mona Caird's *The Daughter of Danaus* (1894) and Grant Allen's *The Woman who Did* (1895) are some of the novels worth mentioning in the context.

During this time, Hardy, alongwith other major writers, such as, H.G. Wells, Gissings and Meredith made pioneering efforts to do away with the "insuperable bar" (Hardy, 53) held by the English society on fiction. He aimed to break down the existing sexual taboos and presented his themes on love, marriage and sexuality with frankness. He condemned the double sexual morality endorsed by the prevalent ideology and criticized both marriage and the divorce laws which favoured men. The polemic elements in Hardy's writing resulted in a volley of accusations and condemnation by the public, but that was the price he had to pay for challenging the patriarchal conventions and ideology. As Merryn Williams observes, in *A Preface to Hardy* (1976), "Hardy is called a Victorian because he lived most of his life in the nineteenth century, and it was the century which formed many of his

beliefs and ideas" (Williams, 61). But, he was not, a typical Victorian. He for one, found it difficult to accept some of the most cherished beliefs of the period, such as Providence, and he seemed to possess a more modern and questioning attitude which only came to literature around the turn of the century. According to a Williams, Hardy was a lonely figure all through his life, and unlike many of his contemporary colleagues, he was not involved in the great public debate about Victorian society. The author often claimed that the opinions which he might seem to express in his work are mere impression – rather than convictions – yet he arguably had views about society, which he also implanted in his work (Williams). Writing towards the end of the nineteenth century, Hardy appeared to be ahead of his time in several aspects, especially in anticipating the breakdown of the laws regarding sexual identity. His strong, independent and passionate women characters, therefore, excited severe criticism from conservative readers because they were unprepared for his vision of the changing role of women. Dale Kramer notes that despite the fact that Hardy was greatly admired by many of his contemporary readers for his forthrightness, he personally only seemed to listen to those who criticized his work (Kramer, 179). As a result, disturbed by the public outcry against the unconventional subjects of *Tess* and *Jude*, Hardy announced in 1896 that he had given up fiction and turned to poetry.

John Peck states that there is a long, traceable path of rebels in Hardy's fiction; characters who seem to collide with the world and are at odds with society. Peck also notes that the majority of Hardy's characters are rebels, not willfully so, but there is simply something in their nature that makes it impossible for them to fit in (Peck, 3). However, Hardy never condemns his character's inability to conform, on the contrary, he takes their side and blames their actions on the rigidity of the contemporary conventions. This pattern of rebellious behaviour, which is more modern than Victorian, is found in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *Jude the Obscure* and to a lesser degree in his short stories, such as *A Group of Noble Dames, Wessex Tales* and *Life's Little Ironies*. Betty Dornell's reckless elopement, Sally's choice of single womanhood, Lizzy's liquor smuggling ring are a few examples of new and refreshing unconventional rebels in Hardy's fiction. But for some of them, this "undisciplined wildness" eventually leads to tragic consequences – Jude dies a miserable death, sick and alone, Sue returns to her first husband Phillotson – whom she has never loved and finds sexually repulsive – , Tess is hanged as a murderess in Stonehenge, and some noble dames faced a lonely life ahead.

Another important aspect of Hardy's fiction that drew a great deal of contemporary criticism but which establishes him as a writer in the

feminine tradition are his portrayal of female sexuality and his views on marriage. Hardy presented his women characters as individuals who are "instinct led" (Ellis) and not as representatives of a gender. Over and over again Hardy demonstrates that a woman's roles in Victorian are artificially created. Born into a patriarchal society which is designed to maintain the male at the centre of social life, "women develop a split in [their] consciousness between self – perception and the perception of others" (Boumelha, 35). This "split" makes them vulnerable to the patriarchal influences which place them in roles at the margins of society.

The woman's sphere in Victorian society consisted of "the world of birth and death, of food and love, of comfort and blood… a very basic world" (Murray, 15). Seldom was a woman expected to take part in the strictly masculine "tales of discovery, of travel, of work, of exploration," (Morgan x), and any woman who did so was branded as unnatural. Literature reflected these beliefs and, in the novels of the period, it was primarily heroes not heroines, who were "seeking fulfillment and growth, and confronting difficult personal and social conflicts" (Holly, 39). Such stories were seldom told about women whose entire existence and purpose in life centered upon providing domestic comfort for their searching, growing, working, discovering men. A woman's place was to be what man wanted her to be, and not, to find a purpose in life beyond

her role as chaste wife and loving mother, a childless and single woman had no place in a society which offered no roles to them as individual and independent human beings.

However, as pointed out earlier in this chapter, with the nineteenth century came an increased recognition of the Woman question [though not directly involved, Hardy was aware of these developments and they are reflected in his portrayal of woman's sexuality and independence]. With the questionings, came a demand for Victorian women to "redefine their sexual natures…[to examine] women's place in society at large, with a reconsideration of the female role in society and life" (Miles, 151). In the 1860s, women actively began to campaign for political equality and a right to live a life independent of the patriarchal ideal of womanhood. By the 1880s, "many of the social limitation, which paradoxically had provided the material coded into literary stereotypes of ' ideal' womanhood had changed," (Ingham 61) and writers began to challenge the portrayals of the intelligent woman as neurotic, "unfeminine, deviant" (Holly, 39) showing a - "Bubbling of discontent and growing awareness that she was dependent upon her husband, who kept her only as long as she pleased him and could legally turn her out into the street any time he chose" (Murray, 21).

The New Woman was born: a more independent, educated, experienced woman prepared to live her own life and make her own decisions. The literature, of the age, snapped up this new image of womanhood and used her "as a source of artistic inspiration" (Cunningham, 19) though not always in a positive way. Many "New Woman" heroines ended up with nervous disorders or nervous breakdowns as a result of their inability to fight the deeply entrenched values of Victorian society (Cunningham, 49-50).

Despite much opposition from a society comfortable with its patriarchal structure, a feminist movement had established itself by the end of the century and was spreading the realization that "if women could set aside the assumption about their own nature… and forge ahead towards any goal they may choose, there was no limit to their possible achievements" (Cunningham, 8). At the centre of this movement is the realization that women are a distinct group, alienated and oppressed by the patriarchal system, which saw man as the "self" and woman as the "other." For the newly hatched feminist, "woman is self and man other" (Schumacher, 35). Recognizing that conventions within the patriarchal culture are designed to favour the male view point, feminism questions "women's relation to language" (Showalter, *The New Feminist Criticism*), analyses "power relations between the sexes" (Kauffman,

(83), and attempts to "express women's experience" (Kauffman, 183), in a world which denies a woman an experience outside of that recognized by patriarchal stereotypes.

Hardy does not accept that biological gender differences somehow enable men to be active, speaking, owning, travelling, working members of society, or that women must be passive, silent, submissive, self - abnegating, idle victims of men's whims. He continually surprises his readers with insights into the trials women must face in a patriarchal society, attacking a language that labels women from outside of themselves and forces them into taking roles designed by a patriarchal order from which they are largely excluded. Giving his heroines their own voices with which to challenge the system, Hardy introduces the individual points of view of his heroines in the face of characters and narrators who struggle to see them as mere stereotypes. He addresses the issue of women's sexuality and deconstructs the notion of the "pure" in *Tess.* The hypocrisy of a system which gives a woman a passive sexual role and at the same time makes them responsible for any and all sexual indiscretions is found to be inadequate and destructive. And Sue's questioning of her obligation to be sexually responsive to a man as a result of a contract between them explores the punitive nature of marriage from a female perspective. Hardy also questions the likely bases

for marriage: sexual inexperience, romantic love and pragmatism. All these questions are posed through his heroines, who challenge the power of patriarchal language, the repression of women's sexuality and the necessity of marriage. These women struggle to explore their opportunities and limitations until they are finally and permanently silenced by the society against which they protest. Hardy's fiction give the women room to demonstrate their individuality, voice their struggles, exhibit their sexuality and question the validity of the conventions forced upon them by the patriarchal society. Hardy does not only deal with "sexuality" and "prostitution" that were considered offensive topics at that time, but wrote "taboo – breaking" works that were at first scorned and rejected by many in the Victorian Society (Avery Simon and Rebecca, 2003: 185). Hardy gives a new and different view of women and in a certain way altered the society's perception and treatment of women. As a matter of fact, "his intelligent and sympathetic portrayal of women is informed by his perception of the inextricable entanglement of gender and class issues" (Harvey, 34). Geoffrey Harvey also adds that Hardy "championed the struggle of the strong, intelligent, sexual woman to achieve selfhood and social freedom." Patricia Ingham (1989) states that Hardy's women are unlike the Victorian because they act to create a

new sense for themselves by denying and resisting male oppression (Ingham,185).

In all his work, Hardy reveals himself to possess what is called the feminist stance. From his sympathetic portrayal of women characters to his vision of a free, unfettered woman – independent and natural – he can be called a pioneer of the New Woman. In his short stories his women and men are miniature portraits of the protagonists of his major novels, but they are invested with the same spirit and experience similar situations as their counterparts do. The issues that Hardy explored and exposed in his major work are reflected with the same passion and intensity in *Wessex Tales, A Group of Noble Dames, Life's Little Ironies* and *A Changed Man*. The constructs of gender, sexuality, love, marriage and the principle of life itself are the themes of these tales.

Hardy's indictment of the double moral standards endorsed by the prevalent patriarchal ideology is depicted in "The Melancholy Hussar," "Fellow Townsmen," "Interlopers at the Knap," "Master John Horseleigh, Knight" and "On the Western Circuit." In each of these stories, the heroine suffers either due to male arrogance or the sexual ideology that confines women to purely personal and emotional sources of fulfillment. Phyllis Grove leads an isolated and lonely existence making her vulnerable to the attentions of a colourless but socially

superior bachelor Humphrey Gould. Torn between filial subjection to a cold tyrannical and undeserving father and a misplaced sense of duty to Gould, Phyllis loses the man she loves, Matthaus, and surrenders herself to a bleak life alone. Gould's deception and hypocrisy is highlighted in his treatment of Phyllis – already married to another woman he becomes engaged to the simple Phyllis to deceive his family. With little consideration, he coaxes Phyllis to carry on the charade till his wife (socially inferior to him) wins the approval of his family; Phyllis' feelings, her reputation and sacrifice are not taken into account. In "Fellow Townsmen" and "Interlopers at the Knap," the inability of the male characters to make proper marriage choices becomes a reflection of the failure to discern a good woman's qualities because of her socially inferior position. Barnet and Darton reject their first choices, marry the wrong ones, and later when death frees them from a miserable marriage, renew their suit with their former loves but both fail. Barnet deserts Lucy for a "woman of whose family even you might be proud" and Darton breaks off with Sally for "an uncured sentimental wound" called Helena. Both reveal a typical male short-sightedness when in comes to assessing a woman's true worth – appearances, social status, a misplaced sense of honour, all corroborated to lead these men in the end to a sad place of remorse and alienation. In "Master John Horseleigh, Knight" the story

begins with a question: "How are we to account for these as it would seem, contemporaneous wives ?" (199) Sir John, seemingly, has a wife and children but secretly marries a second – Edith the young and lonely sister of a sailor, Roger. The narrative leads the reader to assume as Roger did, that Sir John has taken advantage of a socially inferior, poor yet simple girl, by keeping his relationship and marriage to her a secret. Thus, Roger lashes out to his sister (after discovering Sir John's wife and children) – "Ede, ye fond one – for all that he's not thy husband. Th'rt not his wife; and the child a bastard" (207). But when the truth is unveiled at the end it inverts all previous assumptions. Unfortunately, the misunderstanding leads to tragedy. Sir Knight has been honourable all along and the first marriage was a farce – but Roger's predilection to rashly judge his sister on the basis of her gender, leaves her a widow and a life of "absolute obscurity" till her death in middle age.

Hardy's criticism of the formalized system of marriage that becomes an agent of female suppression is similar to the feminist debate on the topic. Hardy has always voiced his dissatisfaction with the existing marriage system which shackles men and women because of its "irrevocability." His novels, especially the later ones, are replete with anti-marriage sentiments and this issue is taken up in his shorter fiction as well. In these tales, Hardy addresses the patriarchal standards of

marriage and divorce that are biased against women. The "An Imaginative Woman" explores, the harmful consequences of marriage made without considerations of tastes, compatibility or deep feelings. Ella Marchmill married out of a conventional desire to be "leased – out" at all costs, finds herself dissatisfied with her coarse, unimaginative and indifferent husband. To fill the vacuum, she fantasizes about a poet she has never met but admired, as a struggling poet herself. These "fancies" develop into passion and sexual love and leaves her with a consuming desire to meet with him in person. Attempts to do so are foiled by circumstances and ironically the young poet, Robert Trewe, commits suicide because he finds life unbearable and meaningless without some woman to share it with. Ella mourns his death grievously and soon dies in childbirth. Her husband a few years later on discovering the dead poet's "lock of hair" and 'portrait' among her belongings, sees an uncanny resemblance between his youngest son and Trewe, whereupon, the innocent child is rejected. The rigidity of the marriage contract, the inability to express herself sexually and the inavailibity of divorce or freedom of expressing her love for another man leads to the tragic end of a woman called Ella Marchmill. The same situation is enacted in "On the Western Circuit." In this story Hardy presents more openly, the sexuality of a woman, who though married, has never been awakened to

experience deep and intense passion for a man. Mrs Edith Harnham's first meeting with Raye, her servant's lover, opens her eyes to the loneliness of her existence – an ageing husband who is cold and indifferent and a dashing, sexually attractive London man causes an uproar in her inner being. The emotional turmoil is intensified when through a series of unforeseeable circumstances, she begins a relationship with Raye – through letters that were supposed to be written by Anna, the maid servant, to Raye, her lover. Initiated by a desire to help her illiterate maid, Edith soon finds herself trapped in a web of deception and sexual desires that overwhelm her. When the truth is unraveled Raye, who has fallen deeply in love with the author of the letters, is married to the "rural" illiterate maiden whom he does not love, and, Edith, is still Mrs Harnham, after all. It can be observed that marriage can stifle and condemn an individual to interminable misery, in the Victorian age, because of the inaccessibility of divorce. Women, thus, become the victims of the conventional codes of morality whereby they are suppressed sexually and emotionally. "The Waiting Supper" a tale about the consequences of evasion and delay, again, highlights the question of unequal matches, erroneous marriage and divorce. In Christine and Nic, Hardy, presents what he considers the best form of happiness achievable by an individual – growing old together, in an authentic love relationship

without the deadening influence of marriage. This couple by a habitual process of postponement, at first, due to conventional reasons and later due to hesitancy never married each other. Christine's desire to send Nic, away to be educated through travel with a tutor, is prompted by her adherence to conventional codes that frown upon marriages between one of higher social standing to another lower in the social hierarchy. Nic's lack of education and cultural refinement becomes an obstacle to their union. An abortive marriage between them, a fight and the appearance of Mr Bellston leads to Nic's departure to an unknown destination. On his return, fifteen years later, he discovers Christine "poor" and married to Bellston, who had deserted her many years before after wasting her money. They both waited for news of Bellston so that they can eventually marry. When his death was confirmed however, the two having grown older continue to enjoy each other's company without formalizing their relationship. As Christine says in the end, "Let us be joyful together as we are dearest, Nic, in the days of our vanity" (84). This ending delighted Hardy – validating as it does his personal views on marriage. "For Conscience's Sake," examines the conventional code of honour and respectability. Millbourne's tardy attempts to rid himself of the burden of his conscience – for the dishonourable manner he had deserted Leonora twenty years before, after a false promise of marriage – is shown to

destroy happiness and threaten his daughter's prospects for the future. This story proves that human meddling – here, for a moral impulse rather than a sexual one – unbalances the stable equilibrium achieved by the "wronged woman" and her child with the passage of time. The belated marriage between Millbourne and Leonora, undertaken by the former for conscience's sake and the latter for her daughter's, merely serves to nullify the conventional ideals of honour. Marriage almost destroys rather than build the future of this family and so Millbourne departs again, this time never to return, with the depressing knowledge that an act of conscience only leads to "the reward of dishonourable laxity" (74). "The History of Hardcomes" takes a look, from the perspective of reckless choices, at marriage and man - woman relationships. Two pairs of engaged couples, exchange partners in the heat of a highly charged sexual atmosphere of a dance party only to discover that they had made the wrong decision. With very little in common to cement their respective marriages, the couples try hard to survive the misery that lack of sexual and emotional fulfillment entails. Death, an accidental one, unites one couple, Stephen and Olive, and the surviving spouses finally marry each other as destined all along.

In *A Group of Noble Dames* Hardy presents the less happy underside of upper-class life. His focus is on the women and the injurious

effect upon them of the clash between convention, marriage and sexual passion. Each dame suffers because of social rules, men and their own prejudices. They attempt to find happiness in marriages set by conventional considerations of class title, wealth, education and refinement, and with the exception of the first and tenth dame, they fail miserably and end up as victims of a system they had striven to uphold. Betty Dornell, Dame the First, is married off at a young and tender age of twelve to a titled man much older than herself. As she grows up, the image of her wedding day remained blurred and hazy, and the face of her husband becomes a vague memory. The terms of marriage included Reynard's claim on her turning eighteen. In the interim period, Betty caught between altercating parents, elopes with a young lad Phelipson to escape Reynard's imminent return. A botched elopement leads to a new discovery for Betty – Phelipson does not love her enough while Reynard whom she meets soon afterwards is able to awaken her sexual interest. This story ends happily with Betty leading a fulfilling married life with the man of her parent's choice. The Second Dame, "Barbara of the House of Grobe" duplicates, though with an entirely different outcome – the dramatic configuration of character types in "The First Countess of Wessex" – an heiress too young to know her own mind, her ambitious parents, an attractive admirer of modest status and a titled suitor who

seeks by a series of calculated moves to conquer her affections. In Betty's story, the conventional hero is exposed as a coward and she finds happiness with an older suitor, whose "mild, placid, durable" affection is the sort that "tends most generally to a women's comfort under the institution of marriage" (44). In "Barbara," Hardy uses these same two conventional types of suitors to explore the distinction between physical and moral beauty, but the values are shifted so that the handsome suitor is indeed good while the man of title is "as perverse and cruel," as we are led, to at first suspect Reynard to be. Barbara's fate is the converse of Betty's – because Betty's husband is patient enough to wait for her to mature into womanhood, and woos rather than coerce her affections, she achieves happiness and produces "a multitude of descendants." Barbara, however, is prevented from developing in herself more than the "capricious fancies of girlhood" (77), first by her overambitious parents and later more maliciously, by the cold and subtle Uplandtowers. Emotionally, Barbara remains an adolescent. The Third dame, "The Marchioness of Stonehenge" presents yet another instance of how class consciousness can stifle or corrupt normal human emotions. Lady Caroline is not forced into a premature marriage but she is like her two predecessors in *A Group of Noble Dames* in that her social position undermines her stability and maturity. Here there are no manipulations

by parents or suitors impending Caroline's development to womanhood, but a more subtle set of forces at work. Her limited upbringing prevents her from discovering the range and limits of her emotional needs: "satisfied with the constant iteration" of the best in life, she develops an appetite for what is conventionally beyond her reach, merely because it is new to her. So, Caroline's romantic feeling for "a plain-looking young man of humble birth and no position" (95) is a "little stimulated" by his casual attentions to another woman from his class. She becomes like a spoiled child desiring what another possesses. As it is for Eustacia Vye in *Return of the Native*, so, jealousy is for Caroline an essential element in sexual attraction. This fact is complicated by Caroline's social pride, which prevents her openly declaring her love for a man of lower station. Her secret elopement displays her dilemma arising out of her inability either to marry or to renounce the man to whom she is sexually attracted. She soon discovers that in gratifying her sexual needs, she had denied herself the gratification of her own social expectations.

The link between the "Marchioness of Stonehenge" and "Lady Mottisfont" is the presence of an unwanted child. Hardy displays the hypocritical attitudes of the Victorian social order towards children, dividing them as it does into categories of legitimate and illegitimate, male and female, and, accordingly meting out the child either social

acceptance or rejection. In the inevitable clash between conventions and individuals, children are often the innocent victims, subjected to a fate not of their choosing. In both these stories, there is a struggle between the two women – one noble and wealthy, the other of simple origins – as to whether the claims of flesh and blood should take precedence over those of affection. The female characters seem at first to fall into stereotypes and to correspond to Milly and Lady Caroline. Phillipa is an "amiable girl" willing in her simplicity to love another woman's child as her own. The Italian Countess is a woman of great beauty and accomplishment who has given up her child for the sake of conventional appearances, but who still longs for the offspring of her passion. It appears at first sight that, as in "The Marchioness of Stonehenge," the adoptive mother possesses a more durable affection than the natural mother, but the two stories finally refute each other. The very moral which the preceding story has so dramatically pointed out is contradicted by "Lady Mottisfont," in which parental affection is seen as a selfish need easily gratified by replacement. As a result the child becomes rejected and is carted off to the care of a kindly cottager.

In "The Lady Icenway," Hardy continues to explore the various aberrations that can exist in marital and parental affection when they are subject to the conventions of upper class life, and the complications that

arise in the inheritance of wealth and title. When the central concern is the production of a "lineal successor" the sexual act becomes a mechanical means to a necessary end, rather than a spontaneous expression of love and passion. Lady Icenway is presented as a woman incapable of any depth of feeling and affection suppressed as they are by social ambition and expectations. She exhibits an unusual lack of maternal and romantic affection. Her disregard for Anderling, except in so far as he can provide her with a child and heir for the wealthy, titled husband, is a denial of both his humanity and her own sexual desire.

"Squire Petrick's Lady," depicts a moral impairment more insidious still: an acceptance by those outside the nobility of the latter's code of values to the extent that it debases their own affections as surely as pride taints the affections of the nobility. The Squire's story revolves around the psychological study of the process by which adulation of the aristocracy can cause a man to disregard his parental instincts and spurn his own son. This story also displays how parental affection can deteriorate into a selfish attempt to enforce their unfulfilled desires and dreams onto their child.

"The Lady Penelope" has for its heroine a very likeable woman who becomes a victim of the renown that accompanies her beauty and title. The hurtful interest of the community into her private life and the

reticence of Sir William Hervey, her preferred lover, in approaching her with a marriage proposal after the death of her first husband, seal Penelope's doom – "the noble lady had been done to death by vile scandal that was wholly unfounded" (209). "The Duchess of Hamptonshire" raises some of the questions of the first two stories in *Noble Dames*, and returns to the issues that opened the volume. Emmeline Oldburne, like Betty Dornell and Barbara Grebe, is forced into marriage by a parent who places wealth and social prestige over affection and social passion. Again, the main characters form a triangle with an impressionable, impulsive girl placed between an attractive young man and a wealthy, titled older man. Emmeline's tragedy, however, unlike Betty's or Barbara's is that neither of her suitors can fulfill her sexual and emotional needs. The Duke of Hamptonshire is cruel and selfish throughout and Reverand Alwyn Hill, in his principled refusal to rescue Emmeline from her husband comes to represent a subtler form of male egoism. Her death is caused as much by a state of unbearable grief and frustration at being left defenceless with the Duke as by the rigours of her journey. Her plea to Alwyn, "O, if you only knew how much to me this request to you is – how my life is wrapped up in it, you could not deny me!" (197) – is as much an anticipation of her fate, as it is an expression of her despair. Hardy may have considered "The Honourable Laura" as a

fitting story to end the volume, *A Group of Noble Dames*, because of its happy marriage achieved after years of penitential suffering .Through all his characters Hardy questions the validity of the rigid marriage system that curbs an individual's innate freedom and causes more misery than happiness. This institution supported by social norms and conventions that are prejudicial to woman, cannot only, restrict a woman's ability to act and feel but succeeds in positioning her in the margins of the patriarchal society.

Hardy also invites his readers to reconsider other aspects of life affected by conventional ideals and social constraints, in these short stories. Ambition, in its insidious form, cause irreparable damage to relationships whether familial or personal, and more often than not, the ultimate victims are women and children. This is projected in "The Son's Veto," "A Tragedy of Two Ambitions" and "To Please His Wife." "The Son's Veto" is focused on a woman whose marriage has insufficiently satisfied her emotional need and has an unconventionally unhappy ending. The heroine, Sophy Twycott is free from self-absorption, but suffers from a lack of self-esteem that prevents her acting, as naturally and morally she should, on behalf of her own happiness. Her lonely isolation and tragedy is perpetrated by her ambitious son, who because of his education and upbringing considers her to an embarrassment. Sophy's

roots lie in Gaymead, a village she loves and is removed from, when she married Mr Twycott a man who stands above her in education and social rank. Randolph's ambition which causes him to dominate his mother has thrown his personality off - balance. He assumes a position of authority and sinisterly prohibits her from marrying a man who is capable of loving and caring for her, in a way her son is incapable of doing. She surrenders to his dictum at the cost of her own happiness. Randolph represents that class of men in whom the ambition to rise socially has depleted them of all humanity and affection. The destructive capacity of social ambition has been portrayed in a similar manner in "A Tragedy of Two Ambitions." The story repeats the theme found in "The Son's Veto" of an aspiring ambitious cleric embarrassed by an unrespectable parent, but explores with greater sympathy the problems encountered by those who seek to improve their professional and therefore social, status. The story treats ambition with both censure and compassion. It can be said that a major theme of "A Tragedy of Two Ambitions," as in *Jude* is "the tragedy of unfulfilled aims." Both Joshua and his brother Cornelius are victims of circumstances that prevent their advancement in society except by hypocrisy. As in the other story, this advancement requires a rejection of a parent who becomes an obstacle, regardless of the consequences. The subject of "To Please His Wife" - ambition and its capacity for

destruction of self and family - is a central theme of *Life's Little Ironies*, and Joanna Phippard has a strong kinship with Randolph Twycott and Joshua Halborough in that all her natural "instincts" are "choked" by the overriding passion in her life. But because she is a woman living in the nineteenth century, Joanna's ambition takes a different form: her hopes for "rising" are pinned not on her own professional achievements but on "mating considerably above her" (144). As a result, her female ambitiousness is intricately woven with feelings of sexual envy, and she can only define her own happiness and success by measuring it against that of her closest rival, Emily Hanning. Emily, however, does not share her friend's ambitiousness – her love for Shadrach has no connection with his class or financial assets – and so, ironically, a triumph over Emily in the sexual arena prevents Joanna from advancing socially. Joanna, then, projects her ambition and expectations on to her sons. In this Joanna resembles the deceased Mrs Halborough of "A Tragedy of Two Ambitions," who died of "too keen a strain" toward advancing the education of her sons. In the end, Joanna loses her husband and sons to the capricious sea and grief replaces her ambition. The theme of "To Please His Wife" and of all the earlier stories in *Life's Little Ironies* is the suppression by convention and ambition of all the fundamental impulses for happiness. The theme of deception in love is found in "Tony Kytes,

the Arch Deceiver" and "On the Western Circuit." "Alicia's Diary" presents, using Richardson's epistolary technique, a women's disturbing possessiveness and sexual jealousy with regard to her younger sister's relationship, with a man she had met on a trip to the continent. Reminiscent of Ella Marchmill's obsessive fantasies, Alicia too indulges in an almost voyeuristic desire to live through her sister's private experiences with Charles de la Feste.

The women in Hardy's novels are not perfect, and in fact, Hardy had himself vehemently rejected the model of the "perfect woman in fiction." So he creates instead a group of women we can all relate to natural, instinctive and human. Rosemarie Morgan sets forth the notion that Hardy's fusion of moral seriousness and feminine sexuality yields, as she says –

> a set of fit and healthy, brave and dauntless, remarkably strong women. The sexual vitality which infuses their animate life generates vigour of both mind and body; from thence springs intelligence, strength, courage, and emotional generosity, and that capacity that so many Hardy heroines possess for self exposure expressing both daring and intimacy…the ultimate intimacy which demands facing the fear of ego-loss in those moments which call for abandon (xii)

Morgan also adds – "Hardy's platform remains consistent and forthright: the world that denies autonomy, identity, purpose and power to women is to be, on his terms, the loser" (Morgan, xii). The women like Sally

("Interlopers on the Knap"), Leonara ("For Conscience Sake"), Lizzy ("The Distracted Preacher"), are as lovingly portrayed as Tess, Sue and Bathsheba, by the author whose vision of women never changes. His sympathetic insight into the struggles of these women, his understanding of their sexuality and his desire to see them emancipated and free is the reason Hardy can be called a writer with a feminist sensibility.

In all his works of fiction Hardy's constructions of gender lead him to complex female protagonists who refused to be interpreted in essential terms. They are conceived within the power relationships of society but go on to challenge and subvert paternalistic sexual imaginations with its notions of essential femininity and straight forward gender patterns attributed to the sexes. Indeed, even the masculine ideals are shown as highly problematic. Barnett ("Fellow Townsmen"), Nicolas ("The waiting Supper"), Sam Hobson ("The Son's Veto"), Tony Kytes ("Tony Kytes, The Arch Deceiver") are some examples of men who experience struggles similar to the women's in their journey through life. Tony has to learn that relationships inevitably entail responsibility and compromise, while, Barnett lives to regret his shabby treatment of Lucy in choosing a socially acceptable woman to marry but one he cannot love; Nicholas finds himself defeated by class and education, qualities he later acquired, to make him worthy of Christine; Sam Hobson

representative of the elemental, natural man has to witness in utter powerlessness and helplessness, Randolph's (Sophy's son) cruelty to his mother. Anderling, Edmond Willowes and Caroline's rustic lover from *A Group of Noble Dames* are in turn thwarted and defeated by class consideration, conventional codes of morality and social prejudices. Hardy's work teems with men and women who are realistically portrayed and active participants in the great drama of life. As Showalter observes, "For the [Hardyian] heroes…maturity involves a kind of assimilation of female suffering, identification with a woman which is also an effort to come to terms with their deepest selves." (10). Feminist criticism is deeply concerned with the ways in which the experience of being male or female in a particular society is reflected through the literary imagination, and Hardy has proven again and again through his work, his faithfulness to a similar vision.

Thomas Hardy, it can be maintained is the only male writer in the Victorian age who allowed his women greater liberty and in doing so captured the spirit of the Age – an age of changes when the New Woman is seen to emerge out of her cocoon as a fully developed, beautiful and startling creature. The woman in Hardy's shorter fiction foreshadow not just Tess but also, the emancipated Sue Bridehead. This ability to capture the diverse nature of women is Hardy's strength. Noorul Hasan notes,

"Taken together the stories constitute significant body of fictional output informed by Hardy's characteristic moral and artistic predilection" (127).

Before concluding, it is worth considering what Dellamora and Kincaid have explored. Their works open up valuable new approaches to Hardy's depiction of sexuality. Importantly, both critics point to the ways in which Hardy's fiction, simultaneously depicts and elicits sexual responses that is transgressive, not only for their failure to conform to standard rules governing courtship and marriage, but also for their failure to subscribe exclusively to the dictates of compulsory heterosexuality. In this field, however, there remains much to be done. In her groundbreaking book, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick makes only a brief mention of the Henchard - Fartrae relationship as subliminally erotic, but Hardy's fiction offers great potential for an analysis of a gender framework in which women are the mediating link between men. Homoerotic relationships are pervasive in Hardy and little has been done in this area. More ignored still, is the subject of female same sex desire in Hardy, which made an amazingly explicit appearance, complete with a lovemaking scene in bed, in the Cytherea – Miss Aldelyffe relationship of *Desperate Remedies*. Analogous to this is the scene in *The Woodlanders* where Grace Melbury and Felice Charmond, sexual rivals

in their respective relationships with Eden Fitzpiers, cling to each other when lost in the woods at night. In these scenes and others, Hardy presents physical and emotional ties between women that seem in the eyes of the twentieth century, startlingly explicit. Yet no one has thoroughly dealt with these relationships.

Hardy is , therefore a writer in the feminine tradition who had a knack of probing deep onto the psychology of women and the rare ability to portray their longing for fulfillment or their stubborn perseverance in the quest for self-hood. To quote Dale Kramer,

> But notwithstanding such indication of the influence upon him of his time and place, his sensitive portrayals of women and his use of their dilemmas as reflectors of his judgment on life have long been factors in Hardy's reputation. Because for Hardy full selfhood taken in more than the stereotypical qualities of one sex…Hardy perceives sex traits as psychological in origin, not as exclusive properties of one sex or the other (8).

Hardy was keenly aware of the mutability of gender roles and the ongoing difficulty of finding – "that homely thing, a satisfactory scheme for the conjunction" as he so aptly puts it in "The Tree of Knowledge" (1894). Virginia Woolf, one of Hardy's earliest feminist critics attributed the 'tragic force' of his characters to "a force within them which in the man is a rebellion against life, and in the women implies an illimitable

capacity for suffering" (253). In *Desperate Remedies* (1871), Hardy states

> In spite of a fashion which pervades the whole community at the present day-the habit of exclaiming that woman is not undeveloped man but diverse…the fact remains that, after all, *Women are Mankind* and that in many sentiments of life the difference of sex is but a difference of degree (II Ch 2, Pt 4).