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ECOLOGICAL CRISIS AND HUMAN PREDICAMENT: A STUDY OF THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMAN AND NATURE IN HARDY'S TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES

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Abstract

The progression of society, encompassing both material and intellectual dimensions, is intricately interwoven with the customs and systems prevailing in traditional societies. Women and the environment hold indispensable roles within every culture and civilization, as their contributions have been instrumental in the advancement of humankind. The symbiotic relationship between women and the environment has been extensively examined and evaluated by numerous ecologists and writers. Presently, ecological disruptions have emerged as significant concerns within the realm of human-gender dynamics, particularly in relation to women's lives and the interface between nature, women, and the colonial patriarchal hegemony, thereby necessitating an exploration from an ecofeminist perspective. This article endeavors to underscore the salient features of ecofeminism and its critique of anthropocentric ideologies. It focuses on the capitalist mentality pervasive in the dominant global order, which exploits both the ecological equilibrium of the natural world and the inherent balance in human relationships. Through a critical analysis of Thomas Hardy's renowned work, Tess of the D'Urbervilles, this paper aims to elucidate how this intricate interplay between nature and humanity presents an alternative perception of reality.

Keywords: *Anthropocene, ecological crisis, ecofeminism, intersection*

1. Introduction

Thomas Hardy's dissimulation towards life is tremendously tragic and pessimistic. He arrays with those to whom life is by no means benign. His exhaustive countenance towards life can be summed up in a few noises. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* he says, "Happiness is but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain." (Hardy, 46) In this cohesion Baker remarks,

> "He was an extremely sustentational temperament, rather bestowed to melancholy, easily wielded to tears, fond of seclusion, though by no means impregnable to good-consortium, and worshiping a candid laugh as much as anyone, especially if the jocosity was a profane of sardonic disposition. All his life he and an emaciation for gruesome perpetration, outrageous legends, thrilling sagas, accounts of incantations, omens, ghosts, slaughter, suicides, and the like. He was incessantly jotting down such things in his diary, and would visit the spectacle to unearth all he could about sundry sinister events and relish its plenary flavor. He nope seems to have missed a funeral, at least of anyone distinguished or of his own affinity, and is entirely of reminiscences of these broody festivals. This sort of hankering after the gloomy, the nefarious, and mystical helps to deem for what has been denominated the 'fetishism' in Hardy's vision of nature and man or woman…. He had an ambassador

> against the universe which he could not cast off, a heart of resentment at oppression and wanton truculence which must have some intention on which to avenge itself." (Baker, 11-12)

Tess of the d'Urbervilles, an exceptional novel set in the region of Wessex and characterized by its skillful use of metaphorical European language, stands as the magnum opus of Thomas Hardy. This is the supreme manifestation of the writer's creative genius dealing with the philosophy of realism. This novel critically portrays a tragic story of a 'pure woman' who is forced to sin by a man she hates and who is deserted and cast by a man whom she adores with her psyche. This immortal belonging to the world of literature, Tess of the d'Urbervilles contains Hardy's portrayals of mortal villainy of men and women. Revolting against conventional morality, the ecofeminist perusal of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* makes it a critical one. The fundamental common aim of ecofeminist criticism interests me most to deconstruct and reconstruct ideologies that have normalized the subjugation and occlusion of women and non-human nature. From the nature goddesses of Roman and Greek mythology to the sensual fruit in the Song of Solomon, we already recognize a tendency to associate women with nature in symbolic characters simultaneously through the descriptions of beauty, purity, and the erotic. Throughout literary history, we see the enrichment of women written in the fecundity of landscape, Nature described in feminine pronouns, and natural deities arising in feminine forms. Literary discourse did not need ecofeminism to make those connections, but it did need a way to understand how those tropes can either empower or subjugate women and nature. In the following chapters, I will discuss narration as a tool that mediates the portrayal of women and nature by subjecting both to the prospect of an observer. Realist fiction provides us with material to study this phenomenon in depth because of its intention to reflect reality. Accordingly, I argue that there are ecological stakes in narrative technique because the way we narrate fictional human relationships to nature reflects and influences actual human relationships with the orbit. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, massive shifts were occurring in those relationships. This period also saw the end of one literary tradition (Victorian realism) and the start of another (modernist experimentalism). The Industrial Revolution has been recognized by geologists as the commencement of the Anthropocene, a distinct geological epoch characterized by human activity as the foremost agent of physical transformation on Earth. This notion holds significance in ecocritical discourse, as it underscores the need to apprehend the human-nature interrelation within an appropriate context to fully grasp its implications. Even, we can use Thomas Hardy in the classroom the same way Timothy Morton uses him in the neologism Dark Ecology which is that the "Anthropocene is the first fully anti-anthropocentric concept," (Morton, 24) as the term itself is an acknowledgment that "humans created the Anthropocene." (Morton, 23); that is, as a way of understanding the machine of agriculture as a symbol for human domination of the nonhuman world, yet one that is inextricably tied to our existence and evolution as a species. In addition to the nuances of Victorian morality that can be teased out and discussed through feminist, political, and religious lenses, Hardy's "unique ecological vision" provides an opening for a reading of his work that furthers ecognosis and makes both palatable and urgent an ecological philosophy of education even in its figurative abstractions. Morton points out that "hiding in plain sight in the prose of Thomas Hardy . . . you see something even bigger than the Anthropocene looming in the background." (Morton, 42) "What on Earth is this structure that looms even larger than the age of steam and oil?" Morton asks. His answer: Hardy provides a widescreen way of seeing agricultural production, sufficient for

seeing not only the immiseration of women in particular and the working class in general at a specific time and place but also the gigantic machinery of agriculture: not just specific machines, but the machine that is cultivation as such, a machine that predates Industrial Age machinery. (Morton, 42)

2. Ecology Que Anthropocene

Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is illustrated as analytical, but it is also fatalistic, culminating in a convoluted sense of justice and leaving his heroine a victim of fate and a godless game of natural selection. The issues at play are two-fold: first, there is the writing itself, often overshadowing plot, that determines how and by whom Tess's story is told; second, there is the plot, wrought with the tension between intellect and industrialization and their violence against both woman and nature. A close anatomy of the narration of the fiction reveals an unsettling tie between Hardy's third-person free transcendental parley and the white, upper-class, male voice of Western science whose perspective turns God-like. Indeed, the backdrop of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is the agrarian English countryside which, before the inclination of the twentieth century, saw mostly farmers (some prosperous, most struggling) and the women who were or hoped to be their wives. The presence of the Anthropocene is perceptibly impending in Hardy's literary oeuvre, wherein he situates his narrative during a critical juncture when Western society teetered on the precipice of modernity and the advent of the Industrial Age. It is through the pervasive authority exerted by an unnamed observer within the narrative that the manifestations of human agency become distorted, resulting in the objectification of Tess and her circumstances as entities imbued with erotic and primitive connotations, subject to the pervasive masculine gaze. Ultimately, this process perpetuates the subjugation of real-world counterparts of Tess and others in comparable circumstances. Within the plot, the relationships of Angel Clare and Alec D'Urberville to Tess and the forms of violence they inflict upon her represent the rhetorical and physical violence to which women and nature are frequently subject and portrays one young woman's negative experiences within England's rural culture from obliteration by time and social change, a move that reveals much of the gender inequality present in English culture at her time.

Moreover, Hardy's novel effectively draws parallels between the emergence of agricultural machinery and the deeply entrenched misogyny prevalent in the rural context of Victorian society, thereby symbolically personifying the escalating impact of the Anthropocene. Here Morton's Agri logistics can be glimpsed figuratively in the fiction's characters and the dynamic between them; namely, Tess Durbeyfield and Angel Clare. The affair between Angel and Tess anthropomorphizes the colonizing rhetoric of profit-driven land ownership and cultivation and, moreover, masculinizes this rhetoric. Over a poster for the economically and socially vulnerable rural woman, Tess might also embody the uncultivated nonhuman world—vulnerable to, yet dependent on, the agricultural machine. Tess, the damsel of an impoverished drunkard farmer, learns that she and her family are descendants of the ancient and well-to-do d'Urbervilles. When Tess's mother and father hear that the other last remainders of the line reside in nearby Tantridge, they send Tess to claim kinship in hopes that their connection to this wealthy family will ease their economic hardship. In doing so, Tess encounters Alec d'Urberville, the character often read as the villain. d'Urberville viciously preys upon Tess, eventually raping and impregnating her. After coming back home upbraided and vanquished, the ethical reproach Tess gropes when she becomes pregnant and gives birth to a child out of hymen and when Tess finds her baby has fallen ill, she obsesses over the child's baptism, accepting that

she must burn in eternal hell for her own sins, but refusing to allow her child the same fate:

> "But now that her moral sorrows were passing away a fresh one arose on the natural side of her which knew no social law…The baby's offense against society in coming into the world was forgotten by the girl-mother; her soul's desire was to continue that offense by preserving the life of the child." (Hardy, 85)

Though it would have been very common for any woman in her situation during this time in England, but her experiences are amplified slightly to construct the tragic fiction Hardy wished to debunk the worst possible upshots Victorian society's gender discrimination in perishable standards and the conduct of individuals might have. Regardless of how one reads Tess's culpability in her own demise, the fact remains that Tess, along with essentially all her female contemporaries living in England, experienced some form of oppression at the hands of a male-dominated social hierarchy. she is condemned by patriarchal society's inflexible values while her rapist goes on with his life in the same state as it was before he raped her, nature itself reflects the darkness and confusion of this moment in her life. For illustration, as Tess suffers through the social exclusion and resulting sense of shame that accompany her pregnancy, she takes frequent walks after dark. During these walks, Tess often feels that nature itself is judging and reprimanding her: "Walking among the sleeping birds in the hedge, watching the skipping rabbits on a moonlit warren, or standing under a pheasant-laden bough, she looked upon herself as a figure of Guilt intruding into the haunts of Innocence". (Hardy, 78) Olga Vélez Caro describes a school of ecofeminist thought greatly concerned with forms of violence—domination as violence, limitation as violence, marginalization as violence—and claims that women and nature suffer from violence in these various forms as profoundly as they do its physical manifestations. Though after some years pass, Tess ventures out again and procures a position as a milkmaid at Talbothays Dairy under the employment of the charming farmer Crick and his wife and in the company of a chorus of other young women from rural families. This is the middle phase of the novel and arguably its most important, for it is "the Talbothays episode . . . Hardy emphasizes both humanity's rootedness in its natural environment and the degree to which it is intermingled with—indeed ultimately identical to—the nonhuman realm" (Heany, 544-45) and the one in which Tess meets and falls in love with Angel Clare. Taken with Tess and confident she would make an excellent wife for a dairy farmer; Clare proposes marriage to a trepidatious Tess. She worries that her blemished past will make her an unworthy bride for Clare. After finally accepting Clare's proposal and marrying him, Tess confesses the events of her past. Clare then denounces the marriage, and in the fashion of Victorian misogyny, deems the matter unforgivable.

In this scene, Hardy suggests that the maternal instinct to care for her child, above even religious order, is nature's doing. The insistence on her offspring's survival, in Darwinian terms, completely overshadows the sensibility of justice with which Tess was religiously raised. In the end, nature wins out, and the child dies having been given the grace of a last-minute baptism. Hardy continues to emphasize this dissonance between what nature demands of women and what religion mandates as Tess breaks the necks of wounded birds to save them from suffering, finding herself "ashamed of herself for her gloom of the night…based on nothing more tangible than a sense of condemnation under an arbitrary law of society which had no foundation in Nature". (Hardy, 258) Nature continues to drive Tess's actions, while man-made rules of society give her conscious cause to chastise herself. Hardy generalizes that all women are imbued with this tendency to act according to nature in spite of religion: "What woman, indeed, among the most

faithful adherents of the truth, believes the promises and threats of the Word in the sense in which she believes in her own children, or would not throw her theology to the wind if weighed against their happiness?" (Hardy, 341) Nature then succeeds in manipulating women more than humans' manipulation of belief can control women's behaviors or truths. Beyond his distancing Tess from God, the problem with our narrator's perspective is that his gaze is both didactic and greedy, so the link he presents between woman and nature is not the traditional one of fertility, but is simply erotic allure. What is beautiful and sensual about Tess and her natural surroundings is relayed to the reader in terms of euphemistic description. The beautiful in Hardy's novel is not the sublime; in accordance with Darwin's theories of sexual selection, the aesthetic is the erotic. As a result, often when Hardy's poetic bent draws out lyrical descriptions of his heroine, the language is so blatantly charged with sensuality that it distracts from her action. The erotic anthropomorphism that permeates this novel often reduces Tess to only that which allures the narrator. Mainak Dutt devotes an entire chapter to flower imagery in Tess of the D'Urbervilles in a critical analysis of nature's role in Hardy's novels, noting a particular proclivity for describing Tess's mouth as "flower-like," her "lips parted like a half-open flower." Dutt deduces that the recurring theme of floral comparisons serves as a symbol of Tess's singularity and singleness, her existence as separate from husband and family; however, I would argue such a reduction ignores the blatant sexual symbolism that the flower and fellow "tightly-wrapped buds" exude. Moreover, in focusing so much of the descriptive language on Tess's mouth, the weight of narration often falls away from what that mouth is saying. In such cases, the narrator's distraction costs Tess her agency. As a result, the aesthetic/erotic gaze generates a particular image of Tess, and the scientific gaze goes on to categorize it.

Hardy's descriptions of overworked animals and other such features of the natural world abidingly altered from its original form for the sake of human convenience. Each of these depictions is a clear example of nature being destroyed by patriarchal society, and when a domesticated animal dies or natural processes fail due to environmental alterations made for human benefit, the destruction comprises a particularly literal form. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* contains several powerful examples of such casualties of patriarchal society's ongoing attempts to improve the situation of humans through the manipulation of the natural world, but one of the most powerful is the death of the Durbeyfield family's horse. Prince, an overworked beast of burden, is killed in an accident with a speeding mail cart while Tess and her brother, both mere children, drowsily attempt to assure their family's financial survival by driving bee hives to market before dawn: "'I — killed him!' she answered, her eyes filling with tears as she gave particulars of Prince's death." (Hardy, 35) Hardy's sense of loss and the tragic pain Tess feels at her own helplessness and the loss of an instrument vital to her family's survival stand out in the precise, evocative words Hardy chooses to describe the horse's gory death:

> "The pointed shaft of the cart had entered the breast of the unhappy Prince like a sword, and from the wound his life's blood was spouting in a stream, and falling with a hiss into the road.… Prince lay alongside still and stark, his eyes half open, the hole in his chest looking scarcely large enough to have let out all that had animated him" (Hardy, 26).

Additionally, the fact that Tess is forced by the patriarchal oppression, to perform the roles of driver and instigator in the horse's death to create in her an unwilling accomplice, and her actions are inherently destructive to nature because they commodify the beehives and bees and alter the insects' existence in a negative manner to satisfy mankind's selfish purposes. Tess's tragically

coerced transgressions occur due to both her father's irresponsible drunkenness the previous evening and the generally oppressed states of nature and women in patriarchal society. Tess is bound by the patriarchal conventions of duty and obedience to her father, so she is also oppressed into assisting in the decimation of nature through her involuntary contribution to the horse's demise. Hardy continues to visualize the brutality of Prince's death using powerful imagery to ensure his readers' emotions will be stirred by this travesty: "All that was left of Prince was now hoisted into the wagon he had formerly hauled, and with his hoofs in the air, and his shoes shining in the setting sunlight he retraced the eight or nine miles to Marlott" (Hardy, 27) Here, the relationship between women and nature hinges upon analysis identifying patriarchal dominance as the cause of both problems, as Gaard states:

> "Drawing on the insights of ecology, feminism, and socialism, ecofeminism's basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature. Ecofeminism calls for an end to all oppressions, arguing that no attempt to liberate women will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature." (Gaard, 1-12)

While there is no shortage of plant and animal imagery in Tess who is repeatedly victimized, perhaps the word "oppressed" provides a better descriptor for those who never wish to label Tess a victim in order to the efforts she makes on her own behalf, by diverse men in her life, the most fertile aspect of the novel for an ecocritical epitome we argue lies in the characters and their relationship to one another. The infatuation of objectivity maintained by the masculine voice charged with telling Tess's story renders problematic representations of women and nature, skewing the understanding a reader can have of Hardy's heroine with the sentiments of the biased, disembodied voice and Tess's death stands out to the ecofeminist reader because the tragic event illustrates both the destruction of nature because Tess is a piece of the naturalistic world and the concealment of one young woman's existence and freedom to a ticklish point at which she must propagate destruction and subjugate herself to nigh absolute death due to escapade. Beer notes, "Hardy like One point made by Niemeyer is that Hardy is often called a "Darwinist." While Alec d'Urberville, "Tess's rapist—a man who ravages the Wessex countryside in search of fresh, naïve prey, and who wields his influence to indulge his obsession with Tess," seems the more obvious colonizer of the human and nonhuman world in the novel, we argue that in fact Angel Clare might be read as the figurative manifestation of the rising Anthropocene and arbiter of Morton's agri logistics. Clare, the son of a learned clergyman, decides not to follow in the spiritual and scholarly footsteps of his father and instead decides to learn "how to be a rich and prosperous dairyman, landowner, agriculturist, and breeder of cattle." (Hardy, 115) While this seems a humble and good-natured pursuit on its face, Hardy is certain to allude to the subtly colonialist motivations driving Clare: "He would become an American or Australian Abraham, commanding like a monarch his flocks and his herds, his spotted and his ring-straked, his men-servants and his maids." (Hardy, 115) The contrast between Clare's origins and current pursuits at Talbothays is played upon and complicated by Hardy as Tess wonders to herself why "a decidedly bookish, musical, thinking young man should have chosen deliberately to be a farmer, and not a clergyman, like his father and brothers." (Hardy, 115) Even when Tess moves through the garth somehow in which the flashpoints of her person are indiscernible amidst the lines of plant and animal life, she is surrounded by. As she moves cat-like through the untamed overgrowth, her skirt takes on "cuckoo spittle" and her hands "thistle-milk and slug-slime;" the skin

of her white arms seem one with the "sticky blight" such that she is in perfect camouflage with the unruly scene. Tess, in Clare's eyes, is the human yet nonhuman he wishes to plow and make profit of. Only later does he find out that Tess has already been the subject of someone else's conquest: Alec d'Urberville, in raping and impregnating Tess, thrust her into the realm of societal and cultural webs that Clare so wishes to be rid of. Tess's rape, her pregnancy, and her infant's death challenge the rigid ontological boundaries Morton explains agrilogistics seek to solidify. Tess is at once human, nonhuman, societal, animal, virgin, and not. Like the wild and impenetrable overgrowth Tess moves through, the once seemingly conquerable nonhuman world seems to Clare out of his reach.

Hardy situates his narrative during a transitional period on the verge of modernity, poised at the threshold of the Industrial Age. However, his characters, according to Morton's conceptualization, find themselves simultaneously complicit in and subjected to the Anthropocene, assuming the dual roles of both the investigators and the perpetrators. As Angel and Tess travel from Talbothays following their wedding, they come upon a "feeble light, which came from the smoky lamp of a little railway station; a poor enough terrestrial star, yet in one sense more important to Talbothays dairy and mankind than the celestial ones to which it stood in such humiliating contrast." (Hardy, 172) The afresh newlywed couple who have merely departed the dairy farm of their former occupations watch as "the cans of new milk . . . [were] rapidly . . . swung into the truck," (Hardy, 172) and, as the train departs the station, "a fitful white streak of steam at intervals upon the dark green background denoted intermittent moments of contact between their secluded world and modern life." (Hardy, 172) Hardy's depiction of the impending industrialized modernity assumes a noir-like quality, as evidenced by the symbolism of the extinguished flame at the railway station. This symbolic portrayal does not singularly embody progress or presage imminent catastrophe; rather, it encapsulates a dual nature of acceptance and foreboding. The passage in question is foreboding on two levels: firstly, due to the looming presence of the Anthropocene, and secondly, due to the imminent disintegration of the characters' marital union. When Tess tells Clare of the events of her past, he is unable to reconcile them with the woman he has fallen in love with: the "fresh virginal daughter of Nature." Indeed, Morton points out that "capitalist economics is also an anthropocentric practice that has no easy way to factor in the equitable things that ecological cogitation and statecraft require: nonhuman beings and unfamiliar timescales." Similarly, Tess's timescale—her past experiences as they have impacted Clare's ontology of her—is unfamiliar and thereby objectionable to him. The timescale of the nonhuman world is similarly unfamiliar and thereby objectionable to us; Morton, with Hardy as his unlikely ally, implores us to stay with the darkness and embrace the unfamiliar. Hardy's novel provides us with a unique opportunity to glimpse what could be characterized as the nascent stage of the Anthropocene, a concept further elucidated by Morton. This notion of "ecognosis," which pertains to our comprehension of ourselves as simultaneously complicit in and affected by the Anthropocene within a noir-like framework, is portrayed as an ongoing and perpetual process without a definitive commencement or conclusion: "ecognosis is like a wisdom that recognizes itself. Knowing amid an escapement." The intention behind our approach is to employ the novel as an illustrative tool, highlighting the omnipresence, urgency, and pertinence of interactions between the nonhuman and human realms, as exemplified by the farmers and milkmaids residing in Talbothays. In looking to characters like Angel Clare and Tess Durbyfield as metaphors for ecological interaction, interference, and change, students can begin to see a complete picture of something rather than

glimpsing bewilderingly into the void of real life and its unintelligible ambiguities.

3. Conclusion

However, to sum up, through the prism of ecofeminist reading of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, we can say that it is so scathing as to earn the novel recognition as "Hardy's most damning indictment of feminine sexual subjection" (Thomas, 113). Tess's marriage to Angel and his intolerant, hypocritical treatment of his wife eventually leads to her death, and in this way, Angel Clare is more villainous than Alec. Alec is openly oppressive, but Angel covers his patriarchal dominance of Tess with hypocrisy, religious ideologies, misleading behavior, and promises of a love he simply cannot provide her. As Hardy's Darwinian narrator relays the life of a dairymaid—a woman of a dying species—from puberty to death, the authority of a gendered, classed voice frequently skews our understanding of Tess's experience. While the narration carries much of the commentary that provides critical critique and Anthropocentric perspectives, it also generates a conception of Tess through a greedy, biased gaze. By exaggerating the impact of the aesthetic and scientific gazes on woman and nature, Hardy problematizes the traditional third-person account that he uses. To demonstrate that both woman and environment suffer subjugation from different masculine forces, Hardy replicates in the plot what he does in the apparatus of narration, formulating Alec and Angel to embody forms of human greed and their associated varieties of violence. As a critique of classes, gendered "objectivity" and the damage man has wrought on woman and nature, Hardy's novel and its narrator produce an effective argument by means of representation, but at that, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* stops. Later in literary history, these same issues would again be recognized and explored, but narration technique would evolve into an alternative, both challenging and changing the objective nature of realist representation.

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