



## Women in the Mayor of Casterbridge: Contrasting Figures of Modernism or Parallel Personas of Victorian Attitudes?

Syeda Peenaz Seerat<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Student, M. A. English, Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University, Noida, Uttar Pradesh

Date of Submission: 28-10-2024

Date of Acceptance: 08-11-2024

**Abstract:** Victorian literature encompasses a wide array of themes ranging from Victorian compromise, the tussle between industrialisation, science and belief in God, new ideals of the canonical goody goody Victorian angelic woman etc. Thomas Hardy's novels explore themes such as human will versus fate, nature as an important agency, complexities of human relationships. The portrayal of women in Hardy's novels are a little diverse in comparison to his contemporaries, something quite contrasting and interesting. The women in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886)- Susan, Elizabeth, Lucetta appear as women of diverging attitudes and characteristics. My paper tries to examine whether these three female characters who appear to be polar opposites on surface level are actually contrasting or just parallel personas in their Victorian attitudes.

**Keywords:** Victorian literature, contrasting figures, parallel personas, Victorian attitudes

### I. Introduction

Explicating the futility of human will versus fate, the indelibility of past, marriage as a transaction while also capturing the intricacies and evolution of the Victorian women, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, published in 1886, further establishes Thomas Hardy as one of the finest weavers of novels with detailed human intricacies. The portrayal of women in the novel can be viewed from the approach of the evolution of women from typical Victorian wife to a modern woman with her individualistic ambitions and desires and how in these three women characters -Susan Henchard/Newsen, Elizabeth Jane, Lucetta Templeman, Hardy registers the trends between Victorian and modern sensibilities.

### II. Discussion

To start off with the character of Susan Henchard, she is the embodiment of the typical submissive Victorian woman- meek, mindlessly ignorant of her husband's drunken behavior and rants. Susan is a pallidly silent woman who walks with 'little interest', she reaches 'absolute

indifference' during the auction and even goes docilely when Henchard sells her off to the highest bidder in an inebriated state. Susan says: "Mike.... I've lived with thee a couple of years, and had nothing but temper. No, I'm no more to 'ee. I'll try my luck elsewhere." and she goes away with her daughter. Susan is apparently commodified here, but Susan's speech carries a stamp of her anguish against the treatment she received from Henchard and Susan was willing to leave 'provided she can have the child'.

Hardy attempts a character recovery-the Susan who comes after a long gap of 18 years is a different Susan. She is no more the helpless, ever dependent woman who resigned to her husband's drunken stupor. She is now endowed with a personal will, feelings, and aspirations. On her first meeting with Henchard right after her arrival, she says: "O Michael!... I meet you now only as his widow. I consider myself that, and that I have no claim upon you. Had he not died I should never have come--- never! Of that you may be sure." Her self-assertion is very remarkable. It tells so much about the changed and confident Susan. At the same time, the implicit sense of detachment that she creates between herself and Henchard that she is no more dependent on anybody even after Newsen's death is mistaken by Henchard. She also gained enough experiences to realize the attempt of intimacy shown by Henchard. She separates herself from that and says that she came to see Henchard and that she will go away with her daughter at once if he wants them to. Here we must remember that Susan's primary aim was to secure a safe shelter for her daughter and herself, and she was aware of Henchard's emotions and impulsive nature very well. Henchard does not want her to go away and thus Susan secures her daughter first and then herself in the hands of Henchard. She has a steely, meticulous determination which is revealed by tenacity of purpose and consistency and 'the propriety of returning to Henchard, if he lived, was also unquestionable. Susan paradoxically really comes to life only after her death when she



posthumously strikes Henchard with a crippling blow by revealing his true relationship with Elizabeth.

But this return to Henchard and her subsequent second marriage to him even after all the humiliation delineates the dependency on men, marriage as a transaction of social security, despite the temporary assertiveness and display of power by Susan Henchard.

Elizabeth-Jane undergoes a drastic transformation over the course of the novel, even though the narrative does not focus on her as much as it does on other characters. As she follows her mother across the English countryside in search of a relative, she does not know, Elizabeth-Jane proves a kind, simple, and uneducated girl. Elizabeth portrays a more modern woman who is learned, simple-minded, wants to get married, have a typical life, but is not submissive to and is controlled entirely by the men around her; although it is significant to mention that she lacks Lucetta's ambition and intelligence. Elizabeth-Jane is often given a role of second privileged narrative consciousness in the novel. She comments judiciously in her various roles: Henchard's step-daughter, Lucetta's friend, object of Farfrae's attentions.

Elizabeth Jane, in a way, forms a common ground in Hardy's novel. She is not subjected to the public ridicule and mistreatment to the same extent as Lucetta and neither is she as invisible as Susan. Though she has undoubtedly more power than her mother, we see her bending under the control and influence of Henchard. From the very beginning of Henchard's remarriage, he expects Elizabeth to behave like the daughter of a mayor. He finds her style of handwriting not up to the mark. After assuming the role of her father, he begins to contort her into societal version of an acceptable lady—forcing her to change her clothes, general appearance and countenance. He assumes that since Elizabeth Jane is a female, she should write ladies'—hand. She finds solace in Lucetta Templeman, because she thinks that if she stays with Lucetta, she can enjoy the kind of freedom she craves for. She accepts Lucetta's invitation and goes to her house. She affirms her individuality when she says: "I would do anything to be independent. Elizabeth-Jane suffers in the same way she lives—with a quiet kind of self-possession and resolve. She lacks Lucetta's sense of drama and lacks her stepfather's desire to bend the will of others to her own. Thus, when Henchard cruelly dismisses her or Lucetta supplants her place in Farfrae's heart,

Elizabeth-Jane accepts these circumstances and moves on with life

By showing Elizabeth Jane as a character who humbly accepts life's turns and twists and tries to move forward, Hardy did portray her in a modern sensibility but, at the same time, by diminishing her overall role in the novel and subjugating her to the whims of Henchard and disabling her to rise above her relations stifling her own individualism and independency, Hardy again draws her parallel to Susan and typical Victorian women.

Lucetta is inarguably an attempt on Hardy's part to portray the modern woman. She embodies the sexuality which Elizabeth-Jane lacks and it is her alter ego who is judged and then casually killed off. Lucetta, too, like Susan, has undergone a change now. She has inherited a large property from her recently deceased aunt. She is now her own mistress. This economic independence gives her a courage to alter her choice from Henchard, whom she now considers as 'hot tempered and stern' and she also thinks that it would be madness to bind herself to him. She says: "I won't be a slave to the past—I'll love where I choose!" "I was a poor girl then now my circumstances have altered so I am hardly the same person" and also because she could realize what it means to be Henchard's wife now. She says: "Had I found that you proposed to marry me for pure love I might have felt bound now. But I soon learnt that you had planned it out of mere charity—almost as an unpleasant duty – After that I did not care for you, so deeply as before." This shows how clearly she understands the terms of marriage. Her selection is based not on emotions but on strong judgments.

It is another matter that her intimacy with Henchard, when revealed in Casterbridge, leads to her social downfall, a miscarriage and subsequently, her death. Though Hardy had captured that those women who are not passive subjects to the male meet with society's censure, keeping in tandem with society's general conventions, his vivid portrayal also hints that he had in actuality, condemned the society for their treatment of women, and not 'the fallen woman'. Casterbridge wreaks vengeance on the image-conscious 'cherry-coloured' woman who had earlier dared to out-rival the 'green, yellow and red' seed-drill.' Lucetta is depicted as a woman of knowledge knowing various languages and is shown to be incredibly intelligent with ambitions of her own which was unusual in itself for the Victorian sensibility. She hides her French language skills because she is aware of how French women were



seen as temptress and seductive at that time. This shows how Hardy subverts the leaning towards modernism by toning down Lucetta's inherent abilities.

### **III. Conclusion**

Thus, we observe that though Hardy had tried to uplift women by lending them a modern sensibility, he was unable to rise above the conventional Victorian attitudes towards women, subduing the attempts of independency by Lucetta and Elizabeth while completely diminishing Susan to a pathetic woman character. He attempts in earnestness to bring in fresh contours to the women characters by letting them have a sense of emancipation in some decisions and at critical junctures in the novel; but, ultimately reduces them to the mercy of male characters, thus putting things in alignment with the existing Victorian sensitivity and attitudes. Thus, one can conclude that although the three female characters are contrasting in their dispositions on a surface level, they are ultimately analogous personas binded by marriage, dependency on men, societal restrictions and fate in some ways.

### **References:**

- [1]. The Life and Death of Mayor of Casterbridge, London, Macmillan, 1920
- [2]. www.victorianweb.org. The Social Role and treatment of Women in Thomas Hardy's 'The Mayor of Casterbridge', January 2018
- [3]. www.brightkite.com, The Evolution of Women in The Mayor of Casterbridge, January 2021