

# Women's Struggle under the Haze of Patriarchy: An Analysis of the Female Image in The Mayor of Casterbridge

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**Abstract:** *The Mayor of Casterbridge is one of the important masterpieces of British writer Thomas Hardy, and the female images portrayed in the novel profoundly reveal the oppression and bondage of the patriarchal system on women in the 19th century British society. By analysing the images of three women in the novel, Elizabeth Jane, Susan and Lucita, this paper explores their existential dilemma and spirit of resistance under the patriarchal system. The paper demonstrates Hardy's deep insight into women's destiny and the feminist consciousness embedded in his works; in portraying these female figures, Hardy not only reveals the oppression of women by the patriarchal society, but also expresses the affirmation of women's self-awakening and the spirit of resistance.*

**Keywords:** patriarchy; Thomas Hardy; The Mayor of Casterbridge; Female image.

## 1. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Thomas Hardy was a critical realist writer in Victorian England, famous for his depictions of rural life and social change in the "Wessex" region. His works deeply reflect the social changes in the late Victorian era, especially the impact of industrialisation and urbanisation on rural life. Hardy's novels and poems are known for their pessimistic view of fate and criticism of social injustice, with special attention to the conflict between the individual and society and nature. His masterpieces include *Far from the Dust*, *Homeward Bound*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and *Jude the Unknown*. The latter four are the most famous, representing the peak of Hardy's tragic novels. These novels are set in Wessex, and "with the help of the framework of love tragedy, they show the social landscape of the rural areas of England in the Victorian period, as well as the tragic destiny of the people at the bottom under the background of the big time, which implies Hardy's unique view of tragedy". Hardy's unique view of tragedy" (Liu, 2021). Hardy's literary style is far-reaching and is considered one of the bridge figures in the transition from Victorian fiction to modernism, and his works are still classics in literary studies and readings.

*The Mayor of Casterbridge*, a long novel by Hardy published in 1886, is one of the "Wessex Novel System", which reflects the complexity of Victorian England during the Industrial Revolution and social transformation, especially the remarkable contradictions in gender relations and the status of women. In the Victorian era, patriarchy was embodied in all aspects of law and social norms, strict ethical and moral concepts and rigid social hierarchies, as well as all kinds of puritanical rules and traditional patriarchal ideology, which were extremely repressive to women (Qian & Liu, 2005). The novel was written against such a background, telling the story of the protagonist, Michael Henchard, who sold his wife and daughter to an unknown sailor when he was young because of drunkenness, and then tried to make up for the mistake after he became the mayor of Casterbridge, but ultimately went to tragedy due to character flaws and fate. With the male Henchard as the central character of the story, and through the description of the experiences of the three women surrounding him, Hardy shows readers their struggle and awakening in the face of marriage, identity and social status in a patriarchal society, revealing women's passivity and resistance in their emotions and destinies.

## 2. RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE

By analysing the female images in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, this paper reveals the profound influence of patriarchy on women's destiny, and its research significance is embodied in the following three aspects: firstly, the study is conducive to deepening the exploration of Hardy's view of women. Although Hardy lived in a male-dominated society and acted as a male author himself, the self-awakening of women and the spirit of femininity shown in his works reflect his deep sympathy and understanding of women's destiny. By analysing the female characters in the novels, this paper digs into the feminist tendency embodied in Hardy's female

characterisation, thus contributing to the revelation of Hardy's keen insight into women's predicament and his feminist consciousness. Secondly, the study is conducive to the enrichment of the study of the status of women in the Victorian period. 19th century England was in the midst of the Industrial Revolution and social change, but women's identity and status were still restricted in the deeply rooted patriarchal social structure. The analysis of this paper shows the struggle of women in marriage, social roles, and self-identity in the 19th century England. Finally, the analyses in this paper are also relevant to the reality of contemporary women's existence. The plight of women's survival and the spirit of resistance in the context of patriarchy are still inspirational to contemporary women in their pursuit of independence and gender equality.

## **2.1 Patriarchy and Women in Victorian Britain**

Patriarchy is a male-centred social structure and system of power, the central feature of which is that men hold dominant power through the family, legal, economic and cultural systems, while women are subordinate. In her book *Theorising Patriarchy*, British sociologist Sylvia Walby refers to the fact that patriarchy remains central to understanding feminism. She states that patriarchal societies are embodied in six areas: paid work, household production, culture, sexuality, violence, and the state (Thompson, 2024). In patriarchal societies, men usually have control over social resources and discourse, and in the family, men take on the role of 'head of the family', with control over the economy and major decision-making, while women are seen as subordinate to men and expected to take responsibility for the care of the home and children (Wong, 2003). Men are prioritised in areas such as education, employment and political participation, while women are restricted by barriers in these areas. Patriarchal values often harbour a male-female dichotomy where men are the initiators and victors and women are equated with passivity and death. Women's subordination is considered natural, and as such, women are not visible and "invisible" (Qian & Liu, 2005).

## **3. ANALYSIS OF THE MAIN FEMALE CHARACTERS IN THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE**

### **3.1 Susan: the Bearer of Marital Bargain and Silent Obedience**

Susan Hunchard is a typical tragic female character in the novel. She spends almost all her life under the shadow of patriarchy, unable to control her own destiny, and can only seek survival and identity under the authority of men.

In the novel, Susan's tragedy begins with the incident of her husband, Mike Henchard, "selling his wife" at the fair, which seems absurd, but this plot is a real event (Hardy, 3), reflecting the objectification of women in the society at that time, and women are dominated by their husbands in the marriage and subject to their husbands' domination. At the beginning of the novel, Henchard drunkenly sells Susan to the sailor Newson at the price of five guineas, in the face of this absurd behaviour, Susan has no choice but to accept Newson's offer in silence after persuading him to no avail, and take her daughter, Elizabeth-Jane, to go with him. This silence is not a real choice in her heart, but the oppression of women in the patriarchal society that Susan has no way to resist.

In Hunchard's eyes, Susan is "submissive" and "foolishly simple" (Hardy, 19), a description that is used not only to reduce his guilt after "selling his wife", but also in the context of the Victorian era. but also to give Susan a fixed identity of passivity and cowardice within the Victorian patriarchal order (Usmani, 103). And Susan's submission to Henchard, in spite of the injustices she had suffered, shows her passive acceptance of her social reality as a subordinate. Her attitude towards her fate is not one of control but of submission, a submission that is exactly what patriarchal society demands of women, who must be dependent on men and must exchange obedience for shelter.

### **3.2 Lucita: The Victim of Moral Discipline and Identity Collapse**

Lucita is another woman in the novel who is victimised by the crisis of identity and the moral standards of the society. She is forced to accept a double identity. On the surface, she is the Bath Lady, but in reality she is Lucetta Templeman from Jersey. This dual identity appears to be self-imposed, but is actually a product of the rational and moral system of Victorian society. (Usmani, 103)

Lucetta is actually considered a relatively free character compared to Susan and Elizabeth Jane. She is wealthy, independent, has an inherited property, and even moves to the city of Castlebridge as a free agent, which contrasts with Susan and Jane's fate of being subjected to family and men. However, Lucita's freedom is not unbreakable. The novel's revelations about Lucita's letters and her past love affairs make her a victim of public opinion and

moral judgement. She tries to get rid of her past by "re-marrying", but the "stain" of her past becomes the fatal wound of her social image, and she is not able to escape from the moral judgement of the society until her death. What is more ironic is that her so-called "stain" was not of her own making, and Henchard had nothing to do with it. However, Henchard does not pay any price for the exposure of the affair, and even tries to use the affair to force Lucita to marry him. (Liu Xinli, 2022) This highlights the moral partiality in the Victorian patriarchal structure: women's past is infinitely magnified and cannot be erased, while men's faults are often downplayed. This unequal moral mechanism makes it difficult for women to escape being controlled, whether they obey the rules or not.

### **3.3 Elizabeth Jane: The Controlled Person of Patriarchal Discipline and Identity Attachment**

In the novel, the image of Elizabeth Jane embodies the oppression and discipline of women in a patriarchal society, where her fate, character and self-knowledge are all shaped and restricted by male authority, epitomising Hardy's critique of the gender power structure in the Victorian era.

The novel opens with the incident of "The Sale of the Wife", which establishes the status of women as "tradable" and "disposable" in the patriarchal society. Henchard's act of selling his wife in a drunken stupor is a straightforward manifestation of the status of women as male subordinates at that time. Although Elizabeth-Jane is not the direct target of this incident, her identity is formally destabilised under the influence of this incident, with the abandonment of her biological father, the compromises made by her mother, and the legitimacy of her stepfather, all of these factors together constituting the complexity of her identity.

Elizabeth Jane's identity is defined by her legal patriarchal status. Previously the daughter of Newsom, she was forced to gain social status through her relationship with Henchard when she arrived in Casterbridge. During her time as the "mayor's daughter," Jane's life is almost entirely controlled by Henchard. Henchard demands that Jane change her name to conform to the legal relationship. He instructed her on how to speak and write. He chastised Jane for comments that did not fit the "mayor's daughter" status. He is outraged by her use of unorthodox speech and words: "He blushed with shame when she wrote a line of misspelled words..." (Hardy, 125) At the end of the novel, he even tries to sabotage Jane's marriage by using Jane's real identity. When Henchard discovers that Elizabeth Jane is not his daughter, his attitude changes drastically, and Jane's identity changes from "mayor's daughter" to "maid". The change of her identity shows the importance of "blood" under the patriarchal system and satirises the absurdity of the value that patriarchal society assigns to women through blood. Jane has almost no voice in this process, and her identity is defined, confirmed and denied by men.

The character of Elizabeth Jane deeply reveals how the patriarchal society, through the all-round training of women's identity, destiny and character, moulds them into the unity of 'disposable existence' and 'moral model', thus reflecting Hardy's critique of the Victorian gender power structure and the Victorian gender power structure. This reflects Hardy's criticism and reflection on the gender power structure of the Victorian era.

## **4. THE HIDDEN STRUGGLE OF FEMALE CONSCIOUSNESS**

In the novel, Hardy's depiction of women's destiny not only shows his criticism of the patriarchal society, but also, to a certain extent, his affirmation and expectation of women's "awakening spirit".

Susan is a typical Victorian female figure. As the original wife of Henchard, she is sold by her husband as a commodity at the beginning of the novel. It seems that she accepts the reality that she is sold, but she also tries to persuade her husband, "Michael, you've said this kind of nonsense in public before. Jokes are jokes, but you have to be careful not to make a big deal out of it!" ("Michael, you have talked this nonsense in public places before. A joke is a joke, but you may make it once too often, mind!") (Hardy, 11). Hardy, 11) This is the first step in her attempt to struggle. Her silent acceptance was just a last resort after she struggled to no avail. Years later, Susan returns to Castlebridge with her daughter, Elizabeth Jane, back to Henchard. This return is not motivated by an emotional reunion, but rather she tries to secure a better future for Elizabeth-Jane out of social considerations and maternal instincts. She chooses to conceal Elizabeth-Jane's birth, and even after returning to Henchard, she remains ripe with silent repression until her death. Her struggle is embodied in "silence and stoicism" and "humiliation", reflecting the traditional female form of invisible resistance. While Hardy's Susan does not have the strength to reverse her fate, he expresses his deep sympathy for objectified women through her elegance of her destiny.

Lucita represents a transitional female figure, she is a gradually awakening female individual in the Victorian era,

trying to break free from the past and dominate her married life. She is a woman who is trapped by her 'bad' past in a patriarchal society, but despite this, she also performs courageous acts of resistance. Despite being pressurised by Henchard to marry Favreau, she tries to put the past behind her and make a fresh start. Unfortunately, her struggle is still crushed by public opinion - when her past "affair" with Henchard is revealed, she is plunged into a whirlpool of accusations and ridicule, and soon dies of both mental and physical shock. Lucita's end is not due to individual weakness, but to the harshness of public opinion towards women in a patriarchal society. In the novel, Hardy uses her death to reveal the oppression of women by the "myth of chastity", which is an affirmation of women's attempts to break free from the shackles of tradition.

In contrast, Elizabeth Jane embodies a more conscious and lasting awakening of female subjectivity. She survives in the cracks of patriarchy, from introverted timidity to composure and tolerance, and finally gains dignity, love and self-identity, which is a symbol of women's self-growth. Under patriarchy, society expects women to be "family angels" who always focus on the family (Yang, 2022). Even in this context, Jane still develops her rational and kind character. When Henchard learns that she is not his biological daughter and alienates her, she does not argue, but responds with thoughtfulness and patience, and again accompanies Henchard in his later years of decline until his death. This moral firmness and emotional balance is a reflection of her inner spiritual growth. She is not impulsive and contrite like Lucita, nor is she hysterical. "Even in the matter of love, which is considered to be the weakness of all women, she controls her emotions calmly, and even after her lover is snatched away by Lucita, she is able to endure the stinging coldness in silence" (Ho, 2010). At the same time, she craves for knowledge, unlike her mother who only knew how to run the house and raise the children. After her awakening of gender consciousness, she bought some new clothes and was immediately praised by the whole city. But she immediately felt guilty: "How would people look down on me if they knew I was uneducated - I don't speak Italian, I don't know geography, I don't know any of the boarding school stuff! Better sell all these pretty things, and buy myself French books, dictionaries, and learned history books!" ("If they only knew what an unfinished girl I am-that I can't talk Italian, or use globes, or show any of the accomplishments Better sell all this finery and buy myself grammar-books, and dictionaries, and a history of all the philosophies! Better sell all this finery and buy myself grammar-books, and dictionaries, and a history of all the philosophies!") (Hardy, 97) Unlike the average woman of the period, who was often resentful when she encountered difficulties, Elizabeth-Jane's reasonableness, decency, and kindness are all characteristics of the modern progressive woman.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Thomas Hardy, with his keen social insight and deep humanistic concern, profoundly reveals the oppression, struggle and awakening of women in the patriarchal society of the Victorian period through the destiny of three women, Susan, Lucita and Elizabeth Jane. Although their life course is different, they all reflect the passivity and powerlessness of women under the pressure of marriage, family and social moral norms at that time, and at the same time, they also show the tenacity and spirit of resistance to survive in the cracks.

Susan represents a typical "submissive woman" disciplined by the patriarchal structure, whose silence and submission have not changed her fate, but highlight the survival wisdom of traditional women's "hidden resistance"; Lucita, on the other hand, embodies the harsh judgement of the social and moral system on women's history, and she tries to reconstruct her identity through marriage. Lucita, on the other hand, embodies the harsh judgement of the social moral system on women's history; she tries to achieve self-redemption through marriage and identity reconstruction, but ultimately dies in the spiritual shackles constituted by public opinion and shame; Elizabeth-Jane, on the other hand, represents a more modern awareness of women's growth trajectory; she gradually realises her identity and moral autonomy through her self-cultivation and rational perseverance, which makes her the most vital and hopeful female figure in the novel.

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