An Analysis of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* in the Light of Eco-feminism

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**Abstract.** Thomas Hardy is a famous English writer of critical realism in the late 19th century. *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* is one of his most influential masterpiece, which Hardy reveals his affinity to Eco-feminism in his views toward nature and women. The novel depicts a country woman, who is unsophisticated, kind-hearted and with natural image, however ends her life in tragedy. Throughout Tess’s whole life in every aspect, the author reveals that the capitalism is permeating into rural areas, which implies his sympathy for those women who are under great oppression but cultivated consciousness of Eco-feminism ahead of time. In order to stress the harmonious relationship between women and nature, he concentrates much on beautiful natural scenery in the area of Wessex. In the characterization, Tess behaves as the daughter of nature, who has a mysterious and intimate connection to nature: her fate even complies with the alternation of seasons. Industrialization and patriarchy has become the root of Tess’s death. The Eco-feminist interpretation of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* aims to call on a profound retrospection on the relationship between nature, women and men. The awareness of environmental protection and of rebuilding the mutual harmony between human and nature, men and women, are also hoped to be provoked.

**Introduction**

**Overview of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles***

Tess is a beautiful, innocent, and pure peasant girl. Out of financial income, she has to listen to her mother’s urge that works for d’Urbervilles family, which is not a real branch of the family in fact. Misfortunes happens: she is raped by the young master-Alec, which makes her pregnant. Tess leaves and gives birth to a child who dies sooner after the baby is born. Later, Tess works as a milkmaid at a dairy farm, where she meets Angel Clare and falls in love with him. On their wedding night, Tess confesses to Angel about her past that she is once seduced by Alec and she gives birth to a child. Angel can’t accept that and leaves for Brazil. From then on, Tess doesn’t receive any information from him. Abandoned by Angel, Tess has to work outside again. At the very time, she meets Alec, who asks Tess to come back to him. Without any news from Angel, and the severe situation her family meets, Tess gives in and lives with Alec. Finally, Angel regrets what he has done to Tess and comes back to Tess only to find she has been driven back to Alec because of extreme poverty of her family. Tess realizes that she has been cheated by Alec so she stabs him to liberate herself. Angel and Tess unite on the run from the police, after several-day reconciliation in New Forest; Tess is arrested in Stonehenge and hanged later.

**The Theory of Eco-feminism**

Eco-feminism, sometimes considered as Ecological feminism, was put forward by the French writer Francoise d’Eaubonne in 1974, which calls for women to make efforts to save the planet, and is a natural outcome of the combination of feminism and ecology movement. According to the Eco-feminists, there is an identifiable relationship between nature and women, for “women can give birth to children and attach to some biological stigma such as menstruation, pregnancy, and nursing.” [1] Therefore, women’s role of being mother has a great similarity with nature’s breeding things and providing essential materials for human beings. The Eco-feminists advocate the union of
the ecology and feminism with the purpose to break away from the domination of patriarchy and make ecological harmony and equality between men and women.

An Eco-feminism Reading of Tess of the d’Urbervilles

"All Eco-feminists agree that there are important connections between the unjustified dominations of women and nature." [2] As is depicted in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, Hardy uses a lot of environmental description to foil Tess’s destiny. For example, the contrast between Talbothays Dairy Farm and Flintcomb-Ash Farm shows Hardy's deep thought about the relationship between nature and civilization. On one hand, he deeply worries that the civilization would destruct nature; On the other hand, he reveals the situation of man and nature. Besides, Tess’s destiny gets reflected from different environmental presentation

The Strong Affinity Between Tess and Nature

The description of natural environment is common in novels. We can see variety of natural scenes, such as seasonal alternation, wind, frost, rain, snow, mountains and rivers. The description of natural scenery plays an important role in a novel, because environment can reflect the character’s personalities and inner world. Throughout Tess’s whole life, she is connected with following five places: The story begins in Vale of Blackmoor, Tess’s hometown, which is as pure as Tess, an innocent girl being far away from the noisy; Out of financial problem, she goes to Trantridge to work for Alec, which is the turning point of Tess’s life and the origin of Tess’s tragedy; In order to start a new life, she works in Talbothays, Tess’s paradise of love, where she meets his beloved; Abandoned by Angel, she works in Filntcomb-Ash and finally to Stonehenge, the destination of Tess’s journey. Every scene of change foreshadows Tess’s fate at different stage of life changes.

Roughly speaking, the connection between natural scenery and Tess can be reflected from the following two aspects:

Seasons Alternation Combining With Tess’s Life Changes. Seasonal changes in the novel shadows the fate of Tess. Life has to experience rises and falls, peace and unrest just like four seasons in one year. Spring is the symbol of the beginning of her life, which not only provides Tess beauty and vigor, but also her dream. The second spring described in the novel is a long time after Tess loses her chastity, she suffers from frustration about her baby’s death. Her energy and vigor are coming back as the spring is approaching; Summer is a dilemma in which Tess is passionate, but at the same time, confused. Affected by the fervor of summer, Tess and Angel’s love becomes more and more intense. However, things never go smoothly just like summer, changing so quickly. Autumn is always thought to be fruitful, but for Tess, autumn is full of regret and sorrow. In the novel, the first autumn is spent after she is seduced by Alec in a forest. Tess spends the following autumn in Talbothays. At that time she is totally confused by Angel’s proposal; The description of Filntcomb-Ash is centered on chilly winter days when Tess has to work continuously, “white dust” and “cold dry air”, suggesting the onset of tragedy. In addition, in the last part of the novel, Tess’s father dies in “a dark and dim winter” and Tess’s tragic life is also ended in a chilly winter day. “It’s in a chilly winter day, the black flag fluttering in the wind.” [3] So it can be concluded that Tess’s life also experienced four seasons. The response between Tess’s life and the nature reflects the Eco-feminist’s idea that women are closely connected with nature both mentally and physically. So through the alteration of season changes readers can truly understand the situation and the feelings of Tess at different stages.

Harmonious Relationship Between Tess and Nature. Eco-feminism believes that human beings, especially females, are inextricably connected with nature. In *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, Hardy shows that women can communicate better with nature, and have the gift to spiritually integrate into a whole with nature. Sheila Kaye-Smith used to speak highly of him that:"Hardy is an adept at conveying the personality of places. He also has the power of combining persons and places into one harmony, and of weaving his story of human joys and sorrows into the changes of the earth as the story of seasons is told." [4]
1. Vale of Blackmoor. In the second chapter, Hardy puts much emphasis on describing the beautiful and refreshing natural scenery of the Vale of Blackmoor in the village of Marlott where Tess lives. Hardy depicts this place is still “untrodden as yet by tourists or landscape-painter.” [3] From that, we can see the village of Marlott is an isolated, primitive place far away from the capital civilization yet. It is just like a heaven staying away from the world. All of these contribute to the characteristics of Tess, innocent, pure and different from others. Not leaving her beautiful hometown once, Tess puts all her spirituals and emotions into the nature in this place where she is born and grows up. She likes to communicate with the creatures in the nature including the flowers, grass and rivers, therefore, she loves nature. At the same time, her soul is affected and purified by the nature.

2. Talbothays Dairy Farm. After Tess is seduced by Alec, she leaves home for the second time. This time, she goes to Talbothays Dairy Farm, which is also free from industrial civilization and presents us a picture of vibrant nature full of vigor and vitality. The nature cures her psychological wounds as well as gives her hope. Far away from the sound and fury of the industrial society, Tess at this place encounters Angel Clare, her most beloved. The love between Tess and Angel springs up and is flowering just in here. Hardy unfolds us such a sight: “Tess takes pleasure in immersing herself in nature because in nature, Tess finds her mental tranquility and in the communion with nature, to some extent, Tess returns to nature and regain a happy life there. That’s why when Tess is with animals on the farm and when Tess gets in close touch with nature, she feels her live enriched and satisfying.” [3] With such beautiful scenery and such romantic love experiences, Tess feels unprecedented happiness.

Tess’s Tragic Fate in the Industrialized Society

Tess is a creature of nature. She is beautiful, innocent and kind-hearted. She loves the nature and animals. However, she is seduced, deserted and sentenced to death. Her destruction is really heart-wrenching and we cannot help wondering who should be responsible for her tragedy.

**Incompatibility with Capitalist Invasion.** The story of Tess happens in the late of 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century in Victorian age, “when economy expands quickly and the society undergoes a rapid change. Especially, in the late stage of this era, with the quick development of the industrial civilization, more and more problems and changes begin to emerge in every aspect of social activities.”[5] As a literary giant standing in transition line of the Victorian age and a new era, Hardy faithfully reflects the turn of social and moral conflict in his works. Women in Hardy’s work are regarded as a breakthrough and get the courage to break the restrict of pursuing happiness. He fully makes use of the hard work on the farm which shapes Tess as a diligent and resilient female figure, however, leading to a typical tragedy at that time. Tess’s family is representative, too. They own no land, not even guaranteeing their basic living conditions. The novel reflects the decline of English peasants by capitalist invasion. In Hardy’s works, the highly developed industrialization doesn’t represent the development, but the fall of humanity and depredation of nature. With civilization and capitalization, the harmony among human, the development of mechanical and nature is being destroyed by money worship and utilitarianism.

**Incompatibility with Social Morality.** Tess’s tragedy takes place in the social change from feudalism into capitalism. However, bourgeois morality, law and religion also contribute to the tragedy of Tess. The bourgeois ethics believe that this is Tess who undermines public morals. Ultimately, the unfair social evaluation contributes to Tess’s tragedy. The hypocritical bourgeois ethics is represented firstly by Tess’s parents. When Tess comes back from Trantridge, her mother accuses her of failing to make Alec marry her. With regard to the natives of Marlott, their attitudes toward Tess were unfriendly, inhuman, even cruel, because she gives birth to a child without marriage. So, after her father dies, Tess’s family is driven out of the village. Of course, there are other reasons, but love affair with Alec is undoubtedly the main reason. Religion should be blamed for her misfortune, too. Alec is an unforgivable man, but the real cause of Tess’s miseries lies in the effect of patriarchal ideology, which dominates the whole society during that period. In addition,
Angel’s moral fault also accelerates Tess’s tragedy. That is unfair to women. Tess is tormented by society and her tragedy is inevitable in the society at that time.

The Significance of Hardy’s Eco-feminist Ideas in Reality

The Significance of Harmonious Ecological Concept

In Hardy’s opinion, human beings and great nature are ought to be harmonious. The rapid development of modern industrial civilization has destroyed the coexisting relationship between man and nature. Though Tess’s living environment is more pure in the first, with the continuous development and transformation of society, people living in the bottom of society have become the victims of capitalist expansion. Without any respect and love for the land, farm machines are on behalf of the industrial civilization as well as new conquerors of this land. Clearly, what Hardy wants to express is that under the aggression of industrial civilization, nature is trampled; women are squeezed, thus becoming the slaves of machine, and the harmonious coexistence of man and nature no longer exits.

The same applies when talking about globalization or globalism today. After years’ efforts and the development of science and technology, human-beings have made great achievement in speeding economy and natural protection. Despite the progress of science and technology, mankind not only do not strive to create and maintain the balance of the ecosystem, but also plunder the resource of the Earth with high-tech, trampling the ecological environment, destroying the harmonious relationship and peaceful coexistence between people and all creatures in the world. We can say human are destroying themselves at the time when they destruct the nature. We have to admit that all the creatures of the nature including the humans sustain through cooperation, mutual care and love. Besides, we should advocate the adoption of a sustainable development model of reciprocity between man and nature economy.

The Significance of Equality Between Two Genders

In the patriarchal society, for universal women, even if they have good character, it is still difficult to obtain independent personality. They are either discriminated, hurt or played by men. As a critical named Rosemary Ruether argued that:“women must see there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of the domination.” [6]

In the book, Tess is blinded by the greedy and hypocritical Alec, which is the beginning of Tess’s tragic fate. People then regard Tess with traditional religious as “dirty woman”, which, to some extent, is unfair for Tess. However, it is Alec and Angel who really make Tess fall into the abyss of life. It is indeed unfair for women at that time, for women have almost no right and they are attached to men. Once she loses her virginity, they will lose the chance to be happy forever. Hardy succeeds in shaping a new female image that suffers from oppression but possesses the charming and kind characters. After being seduced by Alec, Tess’s awakening of female consciousness begins to emerge: Tess strongly opposes any domination and control of Alec, even in the name of love. Tess’s confession to Angel also mirrors Hardy’s desire to build the gender equality. By killing Alec, Hardy wants to demonstrate that Tess is striving to get rid of the ossified thinking and she is trying to change her fate without surrendering to the male-dominated culture, which shows Hardy's sympathy for the situation of women and the desire for women's liberation.

After year’s struggle, we have made some achievements in equality between genders, but in order to change male-dominated social reality, we still need to make more efforts. We ought to strengthen its basic policy of gender equality; in order to safeguard women’s rights, importance must be attached to the role of the media publicity and public opinion at all levels, so that the concept of gender equality can be deeply rooted. Finally, we should not only raise the cultural level of women but also to strengthen women’s ability in practice. In the new era, women’s self-worth must be reflected on the basis of practice that is to maintain self-worth. There is no doubt that this is consistent with Eco-feminist appeal that they require men and women, human society and nature to be unified and harmonious.
References


