

Hardy's Sue Bridehead: The concept of New Woman

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Abstract—when Hardy begins to portray the female figures in *Jude the Obscure*, he has observed the human nature deeply. He understands their complicated behavior and displays them to the readers without avoiding them as taboo. Sue is a classic type who is described by Hardy with his full heart According to the view of a German critic, Sue is the first female feminist who has been described in novels.

Keywords— About five key words in alphabetical order, separated by comma. Hardy attacks the institution, marriage, motherhood, sexuality, irreligious.

I. INTRODUCTION

In 'Jude the Obscure', a novel in which skilful characterization eventually wins the day over laborious editorializing, Thomas Hardy comes close to genius in the portrayal of Sue Bridehead. Sue was the first delineation in fiction of the woman who was coming into notice in thousands every year, the liberated woman of the feminist movement, who defies social norms. She was in other words, 'The new woman'. As Dr. Noorul Hasan observes.

"In her conscious personality Sue is a product of new conditions 'the slight pale' bachelor girl – the intellectualized, emancipate bundle of nerves that just modern conditions were producing. Her representative role as the new woman consists not just in her sexual independence and fickleness, but in her doctrinal justification of a nomadic and preferably a sexual state of being."¹

Sue is among those women characters of Thomas Hardy whom he has drawn with attentive care and fascination. She can be ranked with Tess and such women characters in whose portrait Hardy's imagination finds its full play.

"The character of Sue, at first sight, one of the most innovatory aspects of the book, is in some respects only a more extreme, much franker treatment of a type Hardy had portrayed many times before."²

Sue emerges as a more important character even than the hero of the novel Jude, because she is stronger, more complex and more significant. In 'Jude the Obscure', Hardy shows more insight into the female heart than he had ever shown before. In one sense nothing could be finer than the way Hardy had delineated Tess, yet Sue is by far the more complex psychological invention. Sue is a

woman of 'tight strained nerves', an epicure of emotions' and while she hates the Gothic and is inclined to Greek joyousness she constitutionally shrinks from physical contacts. She is in fact Hardy's first unpredictable woman:

".....She was not a large figure.....she was light and slight, of the type dubbed elegant....There was nothing statuesque in her; all was nervous motion. She was mobile, living, yet a painter might not have called her handsome or beautiful."³

In Jude the Obscure the problem is further complicated by marriages and remarriages, disastrous every time and by the fact of an unwedded mother living in free union with her lover. It is a more complex and subtle story than the earlier once. The novel, because of its unorthodox views about sex and marriages, earned the wrath of the public and the critics alike. Jude, academically inclined, is tricked into marrying Arabella Donn, a coarse vulgar woman who pretends she is with child by him. There is a complete incompatibility of interests and temperaments and Jude's life is made a hell. His hopes of making it to the University are turned to dust. Arabella provokes Jude beyond endurance, smearing his books with pig-fat and abusing him to the passers-by. She deserts him for her parents who are planning to migrate to Australia. She marries again in Australia and considers the husband of that marriage her 'real' one and gets a divorce from Jude, thus setting him free to marry again. Meanwhile Jude has made acquaintance of Sue Bridehead, his cousin and falls 'in love with her despite his aunt's warning against committing that mistake. The cousins' strange friendship, almost platonic in nature, continues until Jude has to tell her about his marriage with Arabella. In a fit of jealous anger Sue marries Phillotson, Jude's former Schoolmaster to whom Jude had introduced her. She confesses to Phillotson that she finds marriage detestable and on Phillotson trying to make love to her, she leaps out of the bedroom window and escapes to Jude. Phillotson finally gives his unhappy wife her freedom at the cost of his career. Jude and Sue live together as brother and sister but Jude's sexuality cannot be denied for long. Fearing unless she consented to have sex with him, she may lose him out to Arabella who had come back, she yields to Jude's desire for a more intimate union, Sue has an incurable aversion to marriage and

though she and Jude are legally free to marry and she has two children by him, she refuses to face another marriage ceremony. Arabella sends them her son by Jude, Father Time who on learning that Sue was expecting another child which was sure to add to their impoverishment, Kills her two sons and himself in a fit of despair. Sue takes it as a punishment of God for her sins and goes back to Phillotson who remarries her. Jude is tricked into marriage with Arabella a second time. He, at the end, dies in despair, all his hopes and expectations ending in smoke. Marriage, thus, has been ruinous to both, Jude and Sue. The novel ends in a double tragedy. The difference from the earlier stories lies in the over sexuality of the male partner and the frigidity and aversion to sex of the female who is an intellectual. Penny Boumelha observes, "In **Jude**, however, Hardy gives for the first time an intellectual component to the tragedy of the woman..Sue's breakdown from an original, incisive intellect to the compulsive reiteration of the principles of conduct of a mid-Victorian marriage manual-and, to a man's, a sexual component which resides not in simple mismatching, but in the very fact of his sexuality."⁴

Hardy attacks the institution of marriage in **Jude** because it is seen as the root cause of so much human suffering if it joins into a permanent wedlock two incompatible temperaments. After his marriage with Arabella Jude realizes the folly of a permanent union between an ill-assorted couples, although it is then too late to withdraw.

"He sees that... their lives were... ruined by the fundamental error of their matrimonial union; that of having based a permanent contract on temporary feeling which had no necessary connection with affinities that alone render a life-long comradeship tolerable."⁵

The unhappy marriages in **Jude** are at least redeemed by the fact the fact that the ill-suited partners do get a divorce. This is true of both men and women. Unfortunately, they do not take advantage of the opportunity which Fate, in moments of rare benevolence, offered them. Jude and Sue hover on the brink of marriage but both their family history and Sue's intense opposition to the very concept of marriage,

"How hopelessly vulgar an institution legal marriage is"⁶ turned them aside. They had children; but they were not married, they were not 'respectable'. And under the social pressure on those who are not respectable they went down. Sue was the first to go, and her end was, in a way, more terrible than Jude's. In the shock of a sudden tragedy--the murder of her children by Father Time-following on the long struggle against the world, Sue, once a free-spirited and courageous girl, was frightened into the worst of catastrophes, a denial of her own faith. She, who could not even bear her husband's

touch, is driven by a sense of guilt to go back to him and force herself into his bed.

Jude the Obscure, as Harold Child, points out, "is tragedy of the half-and-half--of people whose individuality is too strong to fit into the common scheme and too weak to Keep them out of conflict with it. The mass of men are content to live safely within a comfortable moral order. He that aspires to be free of it must take - his risks. For if there is no malignant deity waiting to pounce upon him, there is no Kindly omnipotence to come to the rescue when his own courage, or wisdom, or strength falls short."⁷

It is Sue's tragedy, and it negative to a great extent the logic of her opposition to the institution of marriage, that her convictions were not firm enough to withstand the disasters that overtook her and Jude. When Sue's children die, she views it as a divine punishment for her sinful life and the intellectual basis of female. Emancipation collapses. As Jude says,

"Bitter affliction came..... her intellect broken, and she veered round to darkness."⁸Patricia Stubbs hits the nail on the head when she observes, "Sue's psychological oppression and her failure to combat it effectively add up to a convincing account of a plight many women found, and still find themselves in. Rationally able to demolish damaging beliefs about them and their role, women can recognise and understand their emotional involvement in a system of exploitation. But that does not necessarily mean that they can also liberate themselves from emotional complicity in their own oppression. Hardy's grasp of this problem is one of the most far-sighted things in the novel."⁹ In and through the character of Sue Bridehead, Thomas Hardy projects the modern liberated woman,

"the slight pale' 'bachelor girl- the intellectualised emancipated bundle of nerves that just modern conditions were producing. (1912 Preface to **Jude the Obscure**). Her representative role as the new woman consists not just in her sexual independence and fickleness, but in her doctrinal justification of a nomadic and preferably asexual state of being."¹⁰Yet this intellectuality is of little avail when it comes into conflict with the deep-rooted community beliefs implanted since birth. Hardy has excellent intellectual and personal reasons for arguing against the idea of monogamous indissoluble marriage when it turns sour and painful. He is justified in his belief that,

"Sexual compatibility was a vital part of marriage and that no woman should go against her sexual nature."¹¹In retrospect, in the light of the Present-day sexual behaviour in the west, one may accept his argument for people's right to free union based on love. But we cannot accept **Jude the Obscure** as a serious and

conviction argument either against the convention of marriage or in favour of free union wholly based on love. Sue and Jude is a most abnormal couple and cannot be said to represent the generality of men and women. Their problem is not a common one. One has to remember in this context that Sue's opposition to marriage was to a very large extent inspired by her own pathological sexual frigidity and was grounded much less on her intellectual convictions.

"Sue is a type of woman which has always had an attraction for me, but the difficulty of drawing the type has kept me from attempting it till now."¹²

What Hardy means to say here is that he had never before attempted the portrait of a woman character like Sue in his novels. In fact through the character of Sue Hardy has raised the questions relating to the value of marriage, motherhood, sexuality and the prevailing tradition and customs. Sue represents the rebellious attitude towards religious orthodoxy, traditional morality and out dated Biblical system of thought. She is unconventional and unorthodox in her attitude to society. She is devastatingly critical of moral and religious orthodoxy. The Christian principles in which she believes finally drive her back to Phillotson though going back to him is a living death for her. When Sue's child dies, she sees it happen because of her immoral life and the intellectual basis of emancipation in her breaks down. As Jude says, "..... Bitter affliction came.... her intellect broken and she veered round to darkness."¹³

She does not like Jude for his being conventional. She says:

"But you take so much on trust that I don't know what to say."¹⁴

Patricia Stubbs makes a significant observation on Sue-

"Sue's psychological oppression and her failure to combat it effectively add up to a convincing account of a plight many women found and still find themselves in. Rationally able to demolish damaging beliefs about themselves and their role, woman can recognize and understand their emotional involvement in a system of exploitation. But that does not mean that they can also liberate themselves from emotional complicity in their own oppression, Hardy's grasp of this problem is one of the most farsighted things in the novel."¹⁵

Hardy conveys to us an impression of Sue as, "A free spirit against an oppressed society, the ethereal against the commonplace and the material."¹⁶

At the same time Hardy depicts her as imbued with a strong element of Victorianism which shows itself in her strong aversion to any sexual relationship with a man. She shows an extra-moral attitude towards the normal relation of man and woman. She says that the

views of society about the relations of men and woman are limited.

What attracts us the most in Sue's character even at first glance is her sexlessness? She is not a misogynist – she prefers marriage but what is peculiar with her is that she is in favour of marriage without sexual relation. She is in advance of society, a vanguard; Jude calls her 'a perfect Voltarrian' because she does not regard marriage as a Sacrament. She calls herself 'Ishmaelite' because she is at war with society; Sue is opposed to marriage because in her view it means total self – abnegation for the woman:

"I am called Mrs. Richard Phillotson, living a calm wedded life with my counterpart of that name. But I am not really Mrs. Richard Phillotson, but a woman tossed about all alone, with aberrant passions and uncountable antipathies."¹⁷

Sue's representative character as the 'New Woman' is to be found in her two great reservations around which the plot of the novel revolves – first, her denial of sex and second, her strong misgivings sexual intercourse with him. She marries Phillotson but she refuses to have sexual intercourse with him. She is a rebel. She does not surrender her body to her husband, deserts him and goes to live with her lover – Jude, In fact, when she apprehends that he wants to have sex with her. she leaps out of the bedroom window. She says to Phillotson.

"For a man and woman to live on intimate terms when one feels as I do is adultery, in any circumstances, however legal."¹⁸

Sue loves Jude dearly and goes to live with him, but she does not want to have any sexual relations with him either. When Jude insists on her indulgence in sex, she painfully retorts,

"You are always trying to make me confess to all sorts of absurdities."¹⁹

She cannot conceive of man sexually. She says, "I have no fear of man, as such – nor of their books.

I have mixed with them.....almost as one of their own sex."

Sue wants to give her emotional warmth minus sexuality because she believes that,

"Sex spoils the highest and the purest love that exists between man and woman."²⁰

Sexuality is Gross to her. Robert B. Hellman remarks.

"Sue cuts herself off from the two principal foundations from the beliefs and from the physical reality of sex. The former she tends to regard as fraudulent and coercive, the later as 'gross' In resisting marriage she resists both, and so she has not much left. Her deficiency in sex, whatever it's precise psychological nature, is a

logical correlative of her enthroning of critical intellect"²¹.

It is a sort of hypersensitivity that creates this kind of aversion and supra-sexual attitude. Sue does not lack a womanly delicacy, sensitiveness, fragility and passion. But she is not purely ethereal. A.J. Guerard comments very aptly,

"Sue combines, with her sexlessness and even repugnance to the 'gross' sexual act, a very strong impulse to arouse sexual desire in men. Sue never outgrows her childhood oscillations between the tomboy and the coquette. She re-enacts them with a Christ minister undergraduate when she is of eighteen.... She wants Jude to avoid Arabella not merely because sexuality is 'gross' but because she wants Jude to desire only herself. Her own happiness, as she half realizes at last, depends on re-enactment of this pattern; to live with a man in an ostensibly sexless and fraternal intimacy, arouse his sexual desire, lead him on, reject him and then do penance for the suffering."²²

The appearance of Arabella disturbs Sue's confidence and she submits herself to Jude for the sexual act because she finds it the only means of binding Jude to her and to get herself rid of Arabella. At the centre of her hypersensitivity and herself concern, She becomes a little insensitive to her male counterparts and unconsciously hurts them. It is this eccentricity which becomes primarily responsible for her maladjustment in her relations with both Jude and Arabella. A.J. Guerard again points out,

"Sexual maladjustment is not, to be sure, an isolated phenomenon like red hair or blue eyes; it is also, to use the argon of the day, the product of psychic and social misemployment Hardy saw this clearly enough and tried to relate Sue's sexual difficulties to the 'disease of modern unrest."²³

In fact Sue wishes to give herself fully to Jude but at the same time she wants not to pursue him with a desire for 'gratification'. She would rather go on 'always without sex' because.

"It is so much sweeter for the woman at least, and when she is sure of the man."²⁴

This is a paradox in her nature that Sue wants to be sexually attractive but to remain sexually unavailable. She has something of La Belle Dame Sans Merci, leaving men not 'palely loitering' but worse off than that: of the three men who desired her, one finally has her but only as a shuddering sacrificial victim, and the other two die of 'consumption'. She does give in to Jude but immediately begins campaigning against marriage and in terms so inapplicable – she repeatedly argues from the example of their earlier marriages, which are simply not relevant – that they exist not for their own sake but as a symbolic continuation of the resistance to sex.

Though Sue is not devoid of emotion, she is essentially an intellectual. She is an intellectual woman who thinks as well as feels and who is capable of estimating right and wrong by her argument. Jude tells about her that,

"She was once a woman whose intellect was to mine like a star to a benzoline lamp, who saw all my superstitions as cobwebs that she could brush away with a word."²⁵

Her power of reasoning gives her the faculty of speech and the dangerous habit of playing with her emotions. She argues with Phillotson like an intellectual giant;

"Why can't we agree to free each other? We made the compact, and surely we can cancel it – not legally, especially as no new interests, in the shape of children, have arisen to be looked after. Then we might be friends, and meet without pain to either. O Richard, be my friend and have pity! We shall both be dead in a few years, and then what.... Will it matter to anybody that you relieved me from constraint for a little while."²⁶

In Sue the inadequacy of resources is a representative one that gives her character great resonance. The clue is provided by a crucial experience of her intellectual hero, John Stuart Mill: under the strain of a severe logical discipline he broke down and discovered the therapeutic value of poetry. Sue so to speak, never finds a therapy. In all ways she is allied with a tradition of intellect, she is specifically made a child of the eighteenth century. Robert B. Hellman remarks,

"Sue dislikes everything medieval, admires classical writers, looks at the work of neo-classical secular painters, conspicuously reads eighteenth century fiction and the satirists of all ages. Jude calls her 'Voltairean' and she is a devotee of Gibbon. She is influenced by Shelley as an intellectual rebel, by Mill's liberalism and by the new historical criticism of Christianity. Rational scepticism, critical intelligence are her aims; in his last interview with Sue Jude attacks her for losing her 'reason, brain and intellect."²⁷

Sue is a very rational girl. She is opposed to marriage on principle. When Jude insists on marrying her she doubts whether he will continue to love her as much after the marriage. She thinks that the ceremony of marriage is,

"Destructive to a passion whose essence is its or gratuitousness?"²⁸

What Sue sees of the marriage ceremony in a Church and in the registrar's Office confirms her in her opposition to it. She lives with as his unwedded wife and gives birth to her child by him, in complete defiance of the conventions of society and its accepted code of conduct. This unconventional attitude certainly shows her

exceptional courage and boldness. Sue wants to live in a world without associations and obligations of common human existence. To live in a house with any history or imitational tradition is a mortification to her :

"Such houses are very well to visit, but not to live in I feel crushed into the earth by the weight of so many previous lives there spent."²⁹

Her intellectualism shapes her femininity and breeds in her a 'curious unconsciousness of gender'. She speaks like a logician: "What is the use of thinking of laws and ordinances.... if they make you miserable when you know you are committing no sin?"³⁰

The one definite stigma Sue bears on account of being an 'intellectual woman is her unsatisfactory position with regard to religion. She declares she belongs not to the modern world with its railway stations, not to the middle ages with their Churches, but to the world of the ancient pagan Gods. She is, as a matter of cold fact, merely irreligious. She comments,

"At present intellect in Christ minster is pushing one way and religion the other, and so they stand stock still, like two rams butting each other."³¹

At the heart of the story, Sue is the always simmering revolt of the modes of life which she rejects, the devious self-assertion of the rejected values. Her inconsistency of act is the inconsistency of being. She goes this way and then that way for no other reason than that she cannot help it. She acts in terms of impulse that seems clear and commanding, and is then pulled away by another that comes up and, though undefined, is not subject to her control. From the very beginning her inconsistency has a pattern which teases us with obscure hints of an elusive meaningfulness. Her first action characterizes her economically; she buys nude statues of classical divinities, but 'trembled', almost repented, concealed them, misrepresented them to her landlady, and kept walking up anxiously at night. She reads Gibbon but is superstitious about the scene of her first meeting with Jude. She criticizes unrest rained the beliefs of Jude and Phillotson, but is wounded by any kind of report repeatedly, she can challenge, censure and desire others but is hypersensitive to even mild replies. Robert B. Heilman remarks,

"On the one hand, she freely puts conventional limitations behind her; on the other, she hardly comes up to conventional expectations, She is desirable but does not desire. She wishes to be desirable, which means making the moves that signify accessibility to desire; she is thoughtless and even punitive, but she has pangs of conscience; yet to be certain that she has conscience; she must create situations that evoke pity for others and blame or self."³²

She changes like a chameleon, and is slippery like an eel. She is unreasonably capricious. Hardy says that her logic is extraordinarily compounded. She is consistently inconsistent. She is ready to live with the undergraduate, though she does not love him. She dislikes Phillotson but marries him. She marries him but does not surrender to him physically. She loves Jude, but neither marries him nor surrenders to him physically. She constantly asks him to come to her and not to come to her, to love her and not to love her. She tortures him, then apologizes for torturing, then tortures, him again. She writes a passionate letter to him to see her at Manchester as she is feeling very lonely. Jude goes to meet her but finds her perverse,

"Yet neither was she quite the woman who has written the letter that summoned him."³³

These initial glimpses of Sue prepare for the remarkable central drama of the novel; her unceasing reversals, apparent changes of mind and heart, acceptances and rejections, alternations of warmth and oafishness, of evasiveness and candour, of impulsive acts and later regrets of freedom and of unconventionality.

Sue's behaviour in the novel is a study in schizophrenia. She is a 'maddening compound of sympathy and aversion. Jude characterizes her wrongly when he says, "You are upon the whole a sort of Fay, or sprite – not a woman."³⁴

In fact Sue is indirectly representing modern sex relations. Sue asserts her right to chastity, as one would assert any other right. When Jude declares her to be a phantasmal, bodiless creature, with very little animal passion in her, she replies,

"I am not so exceptional a woman as you think. Fewer women like marriage than you suppose, only they enter it for the dignity it is assumed to confer, and the social advantage it gains them sometimes – dignity and an advantage that I am quite willing to do without."³⁵

Sue Bridehead was a departure for Hardy in so far as she is different from his other heroines. She is the opposite of Eustacia Vye and Tess, partly because she is quite intellectual, rational and rebellious, while the others are much closer to passion. The other sense in which she is different from Hardy's previous heroines is that she survives because of her sexual ambivalence of which she is aware all the time, but which is in fact a most suitable delineation of a not uncommon type of woman in the modern world. In his letter to one of his friends – Edmund Gosse, Hardy describes Sue's character as follows,

".....there is nothing perverted or depraved in Sue's nature. The abnormalism consists in disproportion, not inversion, her sexual instinct being healthy as far as it goes, but unusually meek and fastidious. Her sensibilities

remain painfully alert notwithstanding as they do in nature with such woman."³⁶

Sue tries more perhaps than any of Hardy's women characters to live in the, immediate present. Summarizing Robert Heilmans study of Sues character R.P. Draper writes,

"Sue Bridehead is a character who has taken off on her own, and developed as a being whose brilliant and puzzling surface provides only partial clues to the depths in which we can sense the presence of profound and representative problem. She is a psychological study of coquettishness that is the desire to dominate men through attractiveness coupled with denial, which she indulges in for unconscious, and often self protective motives.

When Hardy begins to portray the female figures in *Jude the Obscure*, he has observed the human nature deeply. He understands their complicated behaviour and displays them to the readers without avoiding them as taboo. Sue is a classic type who is described by Hardy with his full heart. In the forepart of the novel, Hardy portrays her as a figure that has full consciousness of opposition. According to the view of a German critic, Sue is the first female feminist who has been described in novels. Sue, who is naive and innocent, falls in love with Jude, but she is obliged to marry Phillotson due to the oppression of the society. After being married, she and Phillotson are seemingly in harmony but actually at variance, and she is unable to get the noble and unsullied love she has been longing for at all. So she tells Phillotson she wants to live with Jude formally, because they can excite each other's sympathy at heart and communicate with each other by feelings. She thinks the love between her and Jude is true love with the communication of heart and soul. Her thought and action represent the tendency of many women's aspiration for liberation and freedom. The union in matrimony between her and Jude is a marriage relationship which conforms to morality, for they have firm English Language Teaching June, 2009 95 love basis which is also pursued with enthusiasm. Sue also opposes the view of unequal position between males and females. She thinks females are also entitled to choose males as many as males are, an apparent example is a comparison of the chosen females with a she-ass or a she-goat which we have quoted above. Her opposition also exhibits her longing for the society of having males and females on an equal footing. After all, Sue is a woman. Although she has the courage to struggle, under the then social background, her power means almost nothing. In the latter part of the novel she is unable to extricate herself from the conventional view of love and marriage, and has to compromise to destiny at last. She longs for getting her satisfaction of self-emotion, which is to enjoy her fine love life with Jude. And also she wishes

she has good virtue to fulfil her emotionless marriage obligation. In the end, she has to be trapped into a deep, complicated and difficult position. Although once she follows the direction of her own feeling to unite with Jude, she is unable to storm and capture the fort of the traditional view of love and marriage in her mind. This view is not a simple pattern any more. It has turned into a spirit inside her with flesh and blood. When Sue leaves Jude, she has fulfilled her self-figure of sacrificing her own feeling to defend the lawful marriage relationship. In the innermost of Sue's character, how profound the moral experience of self-fulfilment and self-examination is! After the rebellious opposition to reality, Sue has to pay the price all that a woman could pay to get the right that a human should have. Sue is totally disappointed with the real world, and what she wishes is only to meet Jude in Heaven, not in Reality. Her extreme despair reminds us of the word Predestination on the wall of the Notre Dame de Paris. In short, from a fighter with a full spirit of struggles to a woman submitting to the convention under the oppression of the society and waiting for the total predestination of the next life, Sue is drowned by the contract marriage of the capitalist class 3. Hardy's Consciousness of Tragedy is the Source of His Evolutionary View Through the above analysis it could be concluded that Hardy's view of love and marriage has a long course of development. His works during the period of writing his pastoral novels were blended with plenty of tragic factors.

II. CONCLUSION

Sue professes unconventional opinions but is dangerously unaware of the extent to which she remains, at the level of emotional response, fundamentally conventional. Therefore, after her crisis, irrationally, but with a curiously relevant emotional logic. She punishes herself by returning to the most rigid extreme of conventionality.

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