

The Fallacies of Masculinity: A Case Study of Hardy's *Tess of the D'urbervilles*

By Myra Edwin* and Dr. Abdus Salam Khalis†

Abstract

This research paper explores Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* as an introspective novel of deceptive masculinity during the Victorian England. It employs textual analysis to explore masculinity and its misconceptions as depicted in the novel through its two male protagonists Alec and Angel, their attitudes and actions within the social norms of Victorian age. This paper aims to highlight the various incidents that Alec and Angel encounter in the Victorian world of England, which ultimately lead them to take desperate measures in order to defend their own masculine identity. The paper propounds the fluid fallacies in the Victorian identities of Alec and Angel and finds that these fallacies are due to their social consciousness and orthodox masculine behaviour. The paper accentuates the pro-Victorian attitude of the two protagonists who consider England as a land of male dominance and fulfillment where there prevails a legitimacy of patriarchy. However, this façade is soon broken when the two characters inflict extreme manipulation on Tess due to her socially and economically subordinate position, thus leading to her tragic end and exposing their own deceptive identities. The paper employs Connell's hegemonic masculinity model signifying power, privilege and control as the dominant forms of masculinity in the society.

Keywords: deception, hegemony, masculinity, victorian, identity

Introduction

Thomas Hardy's magnum opus, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, traces the life of a young woman named Tess who goes through a difficult life, due to her socially and economically subordinate position, until she meets her tragic end. The two male protagonists Alec and Angel represent the dominant masculinity and its impact on women. The paper studies the depiction of Tess through a masculine lens and the ramifications of Alec and Angel's toxic hegemonic masculinity on Tess.

* PhD Scholar, Islamia College University, Peshawar & Provincial Management Services (PMS) Officer, Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, Email: myra_edwin@hotmail.com

† Professor of English, Islamia College University, Peshawar, Pakistan, Email: drsalamicp@yahoo.com

Research Questions

The questions that this paper seeks to answer are as following:

1. How does Thomas Hardy reinforce gender roles and expectations through his male protagonists in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*?
2. What effects of hegemonic masculinity on Tess's character does Hardy depict in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*?

Research Objectives

The research objectives of this study are as following:

1. To study the reinforcement of gender roles and expectations by the male protagonists in Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*
2. To explore the effects of hegemonic masculinity on Tess's character as depicted by Hardy in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*

Research Methodology

This study employs the approach of textual analysis to explore the depiction of masculinity and femininity in the novel, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Moreover, academic research sources focusing on hegemonic masculinity and gender roles have been used to form the basis of the theoretical framework for investigation. The study highlights crucial scenes in the novel – especially those in which Alec and Angel interact with Tess – to elucidate the effects of hegemonic masculinity on Tess.

Literature Review

Hegemonic masculinity denotes a governing form of masculinity that reinforces gender hierarchies by defining men and women's roles in the society. This notion has been comprehensively deliberated upon in the field of gender studies. Connell, a renowned sociologist, contends that hegemonic masculinity is never a static process but rather a dynamic one by which governing masculine standards are negotiated and reinforced through individual and collective practices (829). Thus, hegemonic masculinity is a socially constructed idea and is constantly changing shape according to cultural and historical factors.

The notion of hegemonic masculinity is fundamental to this research because it is a vital factor in influencing the interactions between the male protagonists, Alec and Angel, and Tess. It is seen that both Alec and Angel's interactions with Tess are different. On the one hand, Alec attempts to control her by employing violent and aggressive ways that reinforce his position of authority. Angel, on the other hand, is devoted towards Tess who is the epitome of a perfect woman personifying purity, chastity and innocence as denoted by hegemonic masculinity.

The way Hardy characterizes his male protagonists further evinces the idea of hegemonic masculinity. Alec exemplifies that form of masculinity which is denoted by violence, aggression, authority, command and a sense of self-importance and arrogance. He considers Tess as a play-thing and as an object to be acquired and controlled, using his social and economic superiority. Contrastingly, Angel signifies a more idealized form of masculinity, one that is distinguished by self-control, admiration, and veneration for female chastity. Nevertheless, Angel's idealization of Tess as a pure and innocent woman eventually reinforces gender hierarchies by fixing her value in terms of her sexual purity.

Mimi Schippers, a sociologist and academician, highlights three elements of masculinity namely: social location, practices, and cultural effects (86). Alec is an embodiment of all three components. Firstly, he uses his social standing as a wealthy landowner for asserting his dominance to overpower Tess. Secondly, he employs violent and deceptive practices to control Tess. Thirdly, he creates a culture of male supremacy that reinforces gender hierarchies. Conversely, Angel embodies the third element only and accentuates the glorification of female chastity, thus also reinforcing gender hierarchies through his idealization of Tess.

Both Alec and Angel perceive Tess through a masculine lens. They both hold an idealized perspective of Tess, deeming her as an epitome of chastity, beauty and innocence. This perception intimidates both of them and inculcates in them a sense of awe for her. This intimidation is due to "the concept of hegemonic masculinity and the dichotomous gendered framework of femininity and masculinity" (Baker 50) which is evident by the responses of the two male protagonists. Alec responds to his affections towards Tess differently as compared to Angel. He "undertakes to overpower her by demonstrating both an assertive and a gentle practice of masculinity" (Tanoori 127). He seduces her and rapes her. Like Angel, Alec too had the misconception of chaste perfection for Tess; but he felt the futile need to destroy it, rather than to pursue it. Contrarily, Angel responds by worshipping Tess. However, just when he can finally claim her, he leaves her after she confesses her past relationship with Alec. This proves that Angel's love is, in the true sense of the orthodox view, of idealized chaste perfection.

Discussion

The hegemonic masculinity model suggests that there are particular characteristics and practices that are associated with the authoritative type of masculinity. These traits which represent the dominant kind of masculinity include physical strength, competitiveness,

violence, aggression and physical and emotional command. Men who personify these attributes are frequently regarded as powerful and superior; however, those men who do not possess these traits are considered weak or inferior. In the novel, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Alec and Angel represent different kinds of masculinity. Alec signifies a form of masculinity which is associated with command, authority, and domination. He uses his wealth and high social standing to exercise his dominance over Tess. Besides, Alec, through his actions and behaviour, also asserts his physical dominance and control over Tess. Contrarily, Angel embodies a more subtle, sensitive and emotional type of masculinity that defies conventional gender norms. He refuses to follow the set patriarchal values of his family and social echelon. He advocates education and intellectual pursuits over physical might and authority. However, despite his total disregard of conventional gender norms, he represents particular types of privilege and power as a white, educated man. The exploration of fallacies of masculinity in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* elucidates the ways in which gender roles and power dynamics are formed and strengthened in a society. The story is a commentary on the detrimental effects of hegemonic masculinity and the need for a more equal and just society.

Tess is an “example of a woman suffering under patriarchal authority” (Lease 32). Tess procures a job at the d'Urberville estate. The fact that after the demise of their horse Prince, Tess's family is financially so helpless that Tess has to work at the estate to support herself and her family suggests that her family does not have any other means of income. This economic helplessness is a result of patriarchal authority that limits women's education, growth and opportunities of financial independence. Furthermore, Alec's sexual advances and innuendos towards Tess represent patriarchal authority, because Alec is a rich and influential man who uses his position of power to take advantage of a susceptible young woman. Tess spends many months trying to resist Alec's sexual advances. The first thing he says to her is, “Well, my Beauty, what can I do for you?” said he, coming forward” (*TOD* 44). This is an apt illustration of the manner in which men in authoritative positions objectify and degrade women by humiliating and demeaning them to their physical appearance. Largely, all of Tess's experiences at the d'Urberville estate are typical of the miseries and sufferings that women, in general, face under patriarchal authority.

Nevertheless, Tess tries to take control of the situation that she finds herself in. Alec attempts to kiss her, and she rejects him. However, it is due to her economic and social circumstances, that Tess at times, succumbs to Alec. According to Lease, “Women from the lower class were

stereotyped during the Victorian era as unchaste and sexually immoral” (38). Since Tess belongs to a socially deprived family, Alec feels that he has every right over her. In the scene, where Alec offers Tess a strawberry, she accepts it. Similarly, in the scene where Alec teaches her how to whistle, she shows a submissive side. Finally, one night on the way back to the estate, Tess – all alone - gets surrounded by some drunken men. Alec, like a knight in shining armour, comes to her rescue. She is grateful and gets on Alec’s horse, but little does she know that it is Alec she needs protection from.

As mentioned above, there are three components of masculinity according to Schippers.

“First, it is social location that individuals, regardless of gender, can move into through practice. Second, it is a set of practices and characteristics understood to be ‘masculine’. Third, when these practices are embodied especially by men, but also by women, they have widespread cultural and social effects” (Schippers 86).

All these components are represented in the hegemonic character of Alec. Alec’s character reaches its climactic point when he violates Tess. While rescuing Tess from the rogues in the woods, he pretends that he has lost his way and leaves Tess to find the right path. On his return, he finds her asleep and takes the opportunity to force himself on her. This act is an extreme violation of Tess’s physical integrity on the part of Alec and reveals his deceptive masculinity. This act signifies the fallacy in Alec’s masculinity as he exhibits his physical strength, social supremacy and masculine authority to manipulate Tess’s susceptibility. In patriarchal societies, this kind of masculinity frequently causes detrimental effects; men are expected to affirm their dominance and command over women, often through forceful and aggressive ways.

This section of the novel tells us about the manipulative side of the Victorian man. The way Alec makes advances on Tess to seduce her or to make her submit to him is a reflection of the typical male mindset. Masculinity is “a social position, a set of practices, and the effects of the collective embodiment of those practices on individuals, relationships, institutional structures, and global relations of domination” (Schippers 87). Masculinity is a social construct and is not just a physical attribute. It includes particular conduct, actions, manners and practices. These practices, when collectively manifested by men in a society, have strong implications on individuals especially women like Tess, on relationships, on institutional structures, and on power dynamics in the society. Alec’s

conduct towards Tess, as a man who represents particular masculine attributes and attitudes, is not an individual case between the two of them. It rather signifies comprehensive social and cultural forces that construct power imbalances and gender relations. Tess's life is turned upside down after experiencing sexual violation at the hands of Alec. Subsequently, Alec's denial to take responsibility of his doing, and Tess's decision to leave the d'Urberville estate and give birth to his child are all examples of the way patriarchal practices have strong repercussions on the lives, interactions and relationships of individuals in a society. Alec misuses his privileged position in the society, due to his immense wealth and lands, to intimidate and pressurize Tess who has weak social and financial standing. This exploitation of the weak woman by the strong man showcases the presence of power dynamics of masculinity in such a society that does not hold man accountable for his actions. Consequently, Tess's tale accentuates the ways in which gendered power dynamics carve individual experiences and maintain male supremacy.

After the temporary departure of Alec from the story, Angel comes as a beacon of light and hope in Tess's dark life. The readers hope that Angel, unlike Alec, would treat Tess the way every woman deserves to be treated. However, this hope is soon shattered with a sudden climactic shift in Angel's character due to Tess's past, and once again the deceptive masculinity of Victorian men surfaces. We see that after a long period of hardships, while working at Talbothays Dairy, Tess finally finds love in the form of Angel. At the onset of this part of the novel, we get a glimpse of Angel who acts as a man who protects women. He is different from other men. Angel is a perfect gentleman; he is kind and compassionate and loves Tess. They get married and on their wedding night, both Angel and Tess reveal to each other the deepest secrets of their previous lives. Angel discloses to Tess that when he was in London, he had been in a relationship with an older woman. Similarly, Tess also confesses to Angel about her dark past with Alec. Tess graciously pardons Angel for his past, but Angel is unable to forgive Tess and says "Different societies, different manners [...] Decrepit families imply decrepit wills, decrepit conduct" (*TOD* 297). Angel blames Tess's past on the fact that she comes from a poor family.

Angel feels as if Tess has been insincere towards him and strongly feels that his self-respect has been threatened and ruined. This does not make sense for both of them are equally guilty. In fact, Angel is guiltier than Tess because Angel did what he did willingly, while Tess was forced into the situation. Yet Angel, the typical Victorian man, cannot digest this fact that Tess is not pure and says, "How can we live together while that man lives? – he being your husband in Nature, and not I" (*TOD* 310). Kareithi calls this hypocritical standard as "the self-righteous rigidity of English

social morality” (27). Angel saw Tess as an epitome of purity and chastity, and when the façade is broken, Angel cannot even stay with her. First he placed her high up on a pedestal and then dropped her low.

Although at the onset of the novel, Angel seems like a man different from other Victorian men, we see that he is no less different than any other man. He does not accept Tess as his wife. He gives her some money, and he himself leaves on a ship. This whole episode with Angel is evident of the fact that a Victorian man would never compromise on morality if it comes to a woman, but if it is the matter of a man, nobody can question it. This shows the double standards of the Victorian man and the deception in his masculinity.

After Angel leaves, Alec returns to Tess’s life. “I couldn’t help your seeing me again!” says Tess blaming her ill fate (*TOD* 411). At this stage, Alec’s character wears another garb of deception and that is of a virtuous preacher. At first, he is remorseful and apologizes to Tess for his actions, but he sheds the deceptive garb as soon as he learns about Sorrow. Tess once again becomes a victim of Alec’s devilish nature. Alec overpowers Tess by saying, “Remember, my lady, I was your master once! I will be your master again. If you are any man’s wife you are mine!” (*TOD* 423). Alec feels that he has a right over Tess. Due to her socio-economic depravity, once again Tess is left with no other option but to succumb to Alec’s advances. Reluctantly, she starts living with him as his mistress. Alec’s deceptive masculinity resurfaces when we see that he has not changed a bit in his motives and actions. He is the same old violent manipulative Alec who used to exploit and still exploits Tess to console his male ego. The male characters in the novel are “permeated by patriarchal discourses, they associate masculinity with power [...] they need to possess in order to identify themselves as men” (Tanoori 123). For Alec, it is Tess on whom he can show and exercise his masculine power.

Forthwith, Angel reemerges in the novel to claim his control over Tess. John Berger (17-18), a critic and a novelist, argues that traditionally the “presence” of a man is intrinsic to “the promise of power” which he personifies. His “presence is striking” when “the promise is large and credible”. However, when “it is small or in-credible”, he is found to have little or no “presence”. Angel, thus, returns seeking his ‘power’ over Tess.

“Even though the concept of ‘hegemony’ is rooted in concern with class domination, systematic knowledge of ruling class masculinity is slight as yet, but it is certainly intriguing. One aspect of ruling class hegemonic masculinity is the belief that women don’t count in big matters, and that they can be dealt with by jocular patronage in little matters [...] The exercise of this form

of power requires quite special conditions – conventional femininity and domestic subordination” (Donaldson 11).

The traditional femininity and domestic subordination of Tess coupled with the hegemonic masculinity of Angel compel Tess to run away with Angel. Tanoori describes it as the “the process of the attempted acquisition of ‘presence’ (a rank as a ‘man’) that Hardy’s men ruin the female protagonist, Tess” (123). Tanoori argues that both male protagonists exhibit their male dominance over Tess and practice their authority on her to manifest their own masculinity. This impacts Tess’s life negatively and leads to her physical, emotional and social decline. Undoubtedly, Tess’s life is ‘ruined’ at the hands of Hardy’s stereotypical Victorian men.

The novel reaches its final climax when male-female roles are reversed. Tess takes matters into her own hands and kills Alec in cold blood, contrary to the injustices inflicted upon her by him. It is observed that this action leads to interruption, if not total breakage, of accepted social pattern of women submitting to dominant men. Although this step leads to further suppression and oppression of Tess at the hands of men – when the male police officers come at the Stonehenge to arrest Tess and finally hang her at the end of the novel, she comes forth as a strong woman to oppose the conventional social norms by taking action against a man who has done her major harm in life.

This strength of character makes Tess bear the cruel exploitation and deception of Alec and Angel, two men of Victorian England. It is seen that a Victorian man rapes Tess, and another Victorian man refuses to accept her as his wife by condemning her as she does not fulfill the Victorian notions of female chastity – bringing forth the double standards of Victorian men. Once again, a Victorian man manipulates her because of her weak social and economic circumstances and makes her his mistress, and she elopes with another Victorian man who further exploits her. She is arrested by the police and hanged for the murder of one of her exploiters, while the other one marries her sister. Consequently, the murder of Alec by Tess instigates a discourse which defies and challenges the notion of hegemonic masculinity as depicted by the two men in her life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the two male protagonists in Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, Alec and Angel represent hegemonic masculinity with its staunch dedicated gender roles functioning in the Victorian society. While both Alec and Angel have placed Tess on a high pedestal,

they see Tess through their own lens of masculinity. Alec uses his control and supremacy over Tess to seduce and manipulate her, and Angel refuses to pardon her for her past, despite his own frivolous history.

Besides, it is seen that the lives of Victorian women are governed by many factors, the most vital being patriarchal supremacy and class difference. Thus, Tess's social and economic standing make her weak and vulnerable to both the manipulative behaviour of Alec and the exploitative actions of Angel. Although Tess tries to resist Alec's advances, her social and economic positions make her helpless as she succumbs to him. Similarly, Tess tries to be loyal and honest with her husband Angel, however, once again her social position makes her vulnerable and she cannot do anything when he abandons her, leaving Tess devastated after being violated at the hands of two ruthless two-faced men.

Therefore, the representation of Alec and Angel's deceptive masculinities is a powerful reminder of the damage caused by staunch gender roles and expectations of the society. Tess's tragic story shows that challenging patriarchal authority and rigid gender roles and the need to empower women is of paramount importance.

References

- Baker, Phyllis L & Douglas R. Hotek. "Grappling with Gender: Exploring Masculinity and Gender in the Bodies, Performances, and Emotions of Scholastic Wrestlers." *Journal of Feminist Scholarship*, vol. 1, Fall 2011, pp. 49-64.
- Barrett, Frank J. "The Organizational Construction of Hegemonic Masculinity: The Case of the US Navy." *Gender, Work and Organization*, vol. 3, no.3, July 1996, pp. 129-142.
- Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London, British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin, 1972, pp. 17-18.
- Donaldson, Mike. "What Is Hegemonic Masculinity?" *Theory and Society*, special issue: Masculinities, vol. 22, no. 5, October 1993, pp. 643-657.
- Connell, R. W., and James W. Messerschmidt. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept." *Gender & Society*, vol. 19, no. 6, 2005, pp. 829-859.
- Harding, Sandra. "Is There a Feminist Method?" *The Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1980, pp. 1-24.
- Hardy, Thomas. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. UK, Penguin Popular Classics, 1994.
- Kareithi, Peter J. "Hegemonic Masculinity in Media Contents" *Media and Gender: A Scholarly Agenda for the Global Alliance on Media and Gender*, 2014, pp. 30-34.

- Lease, Megan Deann. "Beautiful Blemishes: Gender and Female Criminality in Four Victorian Novels." Masters Thesis, Graduate School Appalachian State University, May 2010.
- Schippers, Mimi. "Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony." *Theor Soc*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2007, pp. 85-102.
- Tanoori, Khatereh. "Men and 'Presence': Constructions of Masculinity in Selected Novels of Thomas Hardy." PhD dissertation, School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics, Newcastle University, April 2012.