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Reconstructing the Bias in Education in *Jude the Obscure*

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Abstract

This paper will attempt to examine the class and gender bias in the educational sphere that Hardy has highlighted through his works *Jude the Obscure*. Education is one of the major themes in this novel, including marriage. Jude, the nineteenth century protagonist struggles throughout the novel to acquire the University education. He is a stone mason aspiring to become a scholar in Christminster. Jude like Cornelius and Joshua of 'A Tragedy of Two Ambition' is ambitious but differs in certain aspects. However, economy plays a crucial role to determine the future of protagonists in both works of Hardy. Christminster is the fictional place representing the hub of intellectuals, probably, the Oxford of that period. The teachings of the classics were expensive which a normal student could not afford, as a result, higher education was a distant dream for Jude due to the lack of money, and neither could he compete for scholarship, against properly trained competitors.

The capitalist mode of production helped to establish the rule of male aristocrats and associate the power among them which becomes a reason for the tragedy of Jude as a member of the oppressed class and Sue for her gender that even denies her the right to pursue University. The system of education gave more leverage to the material possessions and social status rather than skill or intelligence. Thus there is a constant struggle between the two classes, in the exclusivity of university admission requirements. No matter how hard Jude works the money is never adequate for him to get into University. Women like Sue were not even provided a chance to pursue higher education, they were allowed to study limitedly, pertaining restricted scope. Women were more of domestic objects, working as procreators of offspring, totally unpaid doing domestic chores. Domestic labour has served the needs of the capitalist economy together with industrial labour. As a result, the power holders acted most stereotypical about the class as well as gender.

Imparting of higher education was the prerogative for bourgeois class only, due to a categorization of social status with the formation of hierarchy. The capitalist oppression with the control of material means has rightly been reflected by Hardy which was perhaps an indirect impression of Marxist thinking that possibly reflected in his personal life too. The commercialized of University Education is apparent under the bourgeois ideology in dissecting the society in terms of its class and gender, to benefit the ruling class. However, Jude's obscurity to transcend the social bias, in spite of an economic disparity, anticipated the readers of later age to understand the changes brought forth by the government in terms of the higher education. Significantly, the story would have been ended differently if the education facility had been conveniently layout for all classes, providing an equal opportunity which Hardy was sincerely advocating for.

Keywords: Economy, Class, Marxism, Gender, Commercialization, Inequality, Stereotype, morality

Introduction

The nineteenth century in England marked a period of remarkable transformation in the history of human civilization, bringing profound changes to the social, economic, and political life of the nation. The rapid expansion of the market economy, accompanied by the Industrial Revolution, encouraged the growth of privatization, which significantly altered existing social

relationships. These developments widened social divisions based on class and gender while also reshaping people's perception of gender roles and their relationship with nature. Adult upper-middle-class men gradually emerged as the dominant social authority, exercising control not only over economic and political institutions but also over the moral and intellectual outlook of society. Consequently, this social order produced a distinctive moral code, commonly

identified as Victorian morality. Despite its claims of moral superiority, Victorian society viewed the "Nether Region" of society—including criminals, paupers, beggars, and other marginalized groups—with contempt and regarded them as morally inferior. The dominant intellectual classes distinguished themselves by valuing mental labour over manual work, while their claims to gentility and respectability were reinforced through strict codes of sexual morality, particularly within middle-class marriage. As a result, Victorian society displayed a striking contradiction between its ideals of rationality and morality, leading to the reinforcement of both class prejudice and gender discrimination.

Victorian England therefore represented both the "best of times" and the "worst of times," with the latter being experienced primarily by the working class and women. Thomas Hardy consistently presented a realistic portrayal of this society, focusing on its prevailing social problems. His fiction reflects deep sympathy for women and members of the working class, whose lives were shaped by harsh social and economic realities. Similarly, Jude the Obscure centres on Jude Fawley, a working-class stonemason who dreams of becoming a scholar but ultimately fails to fulfil his ambition. It is important to note that Jude's experiences closely resemble Hardy's own life, particularly regarding his modest social background and enthusiasm for self-education, although Hardy rejected any direct autobiographical interpretation. The classical authors admired by Jude—"Livy, Tacitus, Herodotus, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Aristophanes... Euripides, Plato, Aristotle, Lucretius, Epictetus, Seneca, Antonius" (Jude the Obscure, p. 96)—reflect Hardy's youthful reading interests. Furthermore, there is little doubt that Christminster, with its detailed architectural and scenic descriptions, was modelled upon Oxford.

Although Victorian England introduced important educational reforms through measures such as the Foster Education Act of 1870, the Education Act of 1878, and the Free Education Act of 1891, which significantly increased the number of educated children, these reforms produced only limited changes in the sphere of higher education. Night schools offered basic educational opportunities to members of the poorer classes, including individuals like Jude, but they provided no realistic pathway to university education. Higher education remained largely reserved for the gentry and clergy, who possessed the financial means to pursue advanced studies. In Jude's case, attendance at a night school enabled him to acquire only elementary knowledge, whereas his remarkable proficiency in Greek and Latin developed through his own dedicated study of classical texts, including Greek and Latin plays and epics. This unwavering commitment to learning shaped his identity as an "obscure" individual, while gaining admission to Christminster gradually became the central purpose of his existence.

Nevertheless, the nature and quality of education in Victorian England were largely determined by the social background of the students. Different categories of schools were established to serve different sections of society, reflecting the hierarchical structure of the age. The educational system for the lower classes was primarily designed to meet the demands of the expanding industrial

economy by producing a disciplined labour force. Similarly, access to university education was governed by strict eligibility requirements. Admission was generally restricted to upper-class men who were expected to be unmarried and closely associated with the Church. While the religious qualification could occasionally be circumvented, the exclusion of women remained virtually unquestionable, as they were commonly regarded as intellectually inferior and confined to the domestic sphere. For most women, teaching represented the highest attainable profession after completing training school education. Sue Bridehead, whose intellectual independence often surpasses that of Jude, is fully conscious of these gender prejudices. Although she is admitted to a training school, she escapes through a window in protest against its irrational regulations. Hardy presents Sue as a woman whose intellect shines like a "diamond," yet such brilliance finds no place within the university system. Her willingness to question even the authority of the Holy Bible demonstrates a rare intellectual courage in a society where religious institutions functioned as powerful ideological apparatuses. The clergy exercised considerable influence over public opinion, often employing religious doctrines to shape collective consciousness and reinforce social conformity. In this context, Edmund Blunden quotes Hardy: "If there is no church in a country village, there is nothing." The statement suggests the pervasive authority of the Church and simultaneously exposes the inadequacies embedded within the institutional framework of Victorian society.

Jude's decision to travel to Christminster is motivated solely by his passionate desire for higher education, a dream first inspired by his schoolmaster, Mr. Phillotson. Phillotson explains that university education is the distinguishing mark of a successful teacher and consequently leaves for Christminster to fulfil his own aspirations. His example awakens Jude's lifelong ambition to become a scholar. Before departing, Phillotson imparts a simple yet profound lesson: "Be a good boy, remember; and be kind to animals and birds, and read all you can" (Jude, p. 68). This advice instils in Jude the belief that education should cultivate humanity, compassion, and intellectual curiosity. Ironically, however, the very educational system he reveres fails to embody these values. The contradiction becomes most evident in the response he receives from T. Tetuphenay of Biblioll College, whose letter reflects the exclusiveness and class prejudice of the Victorian university system:

«"...I ventured to think that you will have a much better chance of success in life by remaining in your sphere and sticking to your trade than by adopting any other courses. That, therefore, is what I advise you to do." (Jude, p. 178)»

Tetuphenay's response demonstrates that Victorian universities valued social status and inherited privilege over intellectual merit. Rather than encouraging Jude's scholarly potential, the institution directs him back to his predetermined social position, thereby exposing the rigid class hierarchy that denied educational mobility to deserving individuals from the working class.

Tetuphenay's prejudice against the working class is unmistakably reflected in his response, which confines

Jude's abilities solely to the sphere of manual labour. His remarks represent the collective mentality of the institutional authority that monopolizes power and dismisses Jude's aspirations merely because of his social background. The opportunities available to members of the lower class were extremely limited, yet an individual like Jude, belonging to the marginalized section of society, challenges this rigid social order by refusing to accept the boundaries imposed upon him. Significantly, Tetuphenay addresses him as "Mr J. Fawley, Stonemason," placing greater emphasis on his occupation than on his personal identity, although Jude's aspirations clearly extend far beyond the profession of a stonemason. Moreover, it is not only Jude whose dreams remain unrealized after reaching Christminster; Phillotson too fails to accomplish his academic ambitions, despite possessing a comparatively secure income that enabled him to maintain a comfortable livelihood until the breakdown of his marriage. It is worth noting that Hardy consciously constructs a literature of class by deliberately choosing a working-class protagonist. Had he not foregrounded the experiences of the oppressed, one of the most significant dimensions of working-class history might never have found such a realistic and enduring representation in English literature. Through his narrative, Hardy faithfully records the prejudices, inequalities, and stereotypes that shaped Victorian society.

Hardy began collecting notes for *Jude the Obscure* from 1887 onwards, prepared substantial drafts by 1890, and completed the full-length novel between August 1893 and March 1895. This chronology clearly indicates that he had already been developing these ideas before the publication of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), another novel centred upon a working-class protagonist. Therefore, there can be little doubt that Hardy's intellectual outlook had been influenced by the ideas of Karl Marx as well as Charles Darwin following the publication of *On the Origin of Species* (1859).

Marx interpreted human society through the framework of historical materialism, dividing it into two opposing classes—the "haves" and the "have-nots"—while emphasizing that labour constitutes the fundamental basis of social production. Furthermore, the concept of class struggle occupies a central position within capitalist society, where conflict persists between the capitalist class, who own property and the means of production, and the proletariat, who possess nothing except their labour power. This struggle ultimately arises from the alienation of workers from the products they create. Jude's relationship with society similarly reflects this condition of conflict, for he continually struggles to improve his life, yet his earnings remain sufficient only to fulfil his basic necessities because of the meagre wages paid for his labour.

When Jude gradually realizes the actual hardships of life in Christminster for members of the working class, he observes that, with the passage of time, even modest buildings come to possess greater value than the ordinary people themselves. His realization exposes a society that attaches greater importance to material objects than to human beings, a principle that has long characterized the ideology of every ruling class. Hardy further remarks that Jude "probably knew more about those buildings materially, artistically, and historically than any one of their inmates" (*Jude*, 145);

nevertheless, there remained "the only wall—but what a wall!" separating him from the scholars within the university. The wall functions as a profoundly ironic symbol because it was constructed by labourers such as Jude, yet it simultaneously serves as the barrier that excludes them while granting privilege to those who never participated in its construction. Moreover, this image illustrates the Marxist concept of the alienation of labour from its product. Despite the immense effort, skill, and creativity invested by workers and craftsmen in producing magnificent structures, history usually remembers only those who possess wealth and capital and who pay for the labour, while overlooking the indispensable contribution made by the workers themselves. The question of materiality in contribution towards a form of social morality arises in the text with the introduction of Arabella (Jude's legal wife), especially due to the survival instinct she presents in her character. Her animalistic nature which Mrs Oliphant calls a 'human pig' is nothing but a Darwinian figure. Although her character is comprised of a peculiar Amazonian figure, one cannot deny her morality as a product being subscribed by a society that totally neglects the lower class women. In Marxian view, a superstructure of society is related to the economic base, and it is the relation of production that determines the 'ideology' of people. Thus, the religious and political ideology that Arabella seems to have is a creation of the prevailing economic structure which is under the control of upper-class people. Marriage for instance, in Victorian culture, was an ultimate goal for any woman. They were expected to perform actively all the household works and, had to surrender their legal existence on marriage. It was assumed that girls need no formal education as long as they could look beautiful and produce a good number of children. Thus, Arabella's several marriages are also based on the opportunity she saw from the marriage since there was not much scope for any working-class women to look forward to themselves. Unlike others, Hardy's female characters explore an area outside the domain of household, like Arabella, serving as a barmaid before and after meeting Jude. Also it is visible that the marriage as an instrument for women's exploitation, is on the contrary, used by her as a means to survive through and her utterance that "poor folk must live" certainly depicts the condition of working-class women, who were even twice marginalized which laid them to do anything for their survival, even the reason behind increasing prostitution was due to these biased nature of society. Consequently, marriage became an institution of profit making in regard to which an educated girl Rosa, a character from 'A Tragedy of Two ambitions', had to impress Mr Fellmer, a widower, to become a dignitary wife of a wealthy man. It occurred to her brother Joshua that her 'physical gift of nature might do more for them than nature intellectual gift'. The lack of opportunities that Rosa had, as compared to her brothers, seems to convey that marrying to a Squire is her ultimate goal. Similarly, another reason behind Sue's marriage to Phillotson, beside Jude's marital status, was her concern for security in her life as a woman. Victorian women were devoid of their economic rights, they had to rely on their husband or father because a woman could not attend a University and become clergy or any rank similar to that, even if she would have been, then all her money would have owned by her husband. Thus, Hardy's most women

characters are bold and talented, yet the possibility of sustaining as an independent woman remains infertile due to the oppressive socioeconomic structure of society.

In this moment of dynamic social transformation and widespread social consciousness, another Victorian author, Grant Allen raised the question of women's education and rights in his novel *The Woman Who Did*. The same year Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* was published, Grant had introduced Herminia Barton, who is a graduate of Girton College. Throughout the text of that period, the 'New Woman' was constantly figured as a 'Girton Girl'. As a result, Herminia's education certainly posed a challenge to male authority that formed a stereotypical notion for women, she advocated for 'freeman's education', since only the minority of women started to pursue Higher education as compared to men. Though Girton College was under the Cambridge University, the education imparted were merely another form of disguise that does not expect a woman to become economically independent because, according to the morality of society women were still inferior to men. However, there was no space for women to perform pragmatic actions and the education available to them was 'pretence of freedom' because women were still warned by the male authority that if they vied for educational achievements, their reproductive capacities would be impaired by the practice of educational activity. Herminia observes that: 'if you begin by educating women, you must end by emancipating them' (Allen 4). Even, it was presumed that women were not capable of studying subjects like Arithmetic and original classics. There was no option given to women to pursue University education. Thus, there can be no doubt that Herminia was against the inadequate opportunity available for women, although, the number of colleges rose significantly between the 1860s and 1890s. Though Herminia was a daughter of a Dean, her position did not change her outlook towards the biased education prevalent at that time. This interaction between class and gender and its interconnected character resulted in the subjugation of women in general and working class in particular.

However, the educational institutions were still on the hands of those who were ruling the society in service to large industries. Education had never been separated from the class and gender interest, it was in fact governed by antagonistic forces that further suppressed and disengaged working class by charging very high fees. Like Mr Carter, a workman who meets Jude on the roadside, rightly puts up his observation regarding Christminster as raising parsons 'like radishes in a bed', transforming slouching and clumsy youth into a solemn preacher with long face, without any corrupt passion and by putting "long black coat, waistcoat and religious collar and hat, same as they used to wear in scripture". (Jude 82) This gives an idea of Objectification of students in the institution, by merely bringing some external changes or transformation, like that of manufacturing goods in the factories. He adds "there, 'tis their business, like anybody else's". However, with this phrase, Christminster represents a hub for the commercialization of an education which is not much different from any other business that enables men to earn a good amount of money. Nevertheless, Mr Carter, a minor character who glorifies the place for its knowledge but the description he provides, presents a true

picture of the place.

However, Hardy incorporates Victorian mobility as a crucial jump from one class to another, commonly as a product of education. Evidently, education becomes an integral part in the matters of courtship in Hardy's work like 'A Tragedy of two Ambitions'. When Joshua and Cornelius discuss their sister's future, it is basically to find a better husband rather than a good job. Nonetheless, the ambition to attain an upper-class status had cultivated more values for material objects than the education in its true sense. In the case of Joshua and Cornelius, their University dreams were chiefly encouraged by the ambition to become the clergymen, in order to raise their status in the society, however, like every other tragedy of Hardy, it fails to get fulfilled. University for them was a mechanism to meet their end, whereas, for Jude, it was an end in itself, he reflected an altruistic motive behind his aspiration. He covets University education to enrich his mind with the guided knowledge of scholars and probably to become a great teacher. His ardour and interest are contrasting to those two brothers, who deny helping their father and let him drown to die before their eyes, in spite of the help they could offer to him, only to avoid the embarrassment that could have been brought by their father and to save their sister's marriage. For that sake they let their humanity die. But Jude is an epitome of humanity who even serves love to animals. Along with proper education, there comes a 'consciousness', for which Jude was striving for. He appears to be unaware of class demarcation that is allocated by the economic system of society which has divided different jobs for different classes. Similarly, it was possible that working people would have followed the path of Jude if ever he had received a chance to acquire free university education, which was obstructed by the capitalist structure of society since they would lose the labour power required for a profit-making market economy. The sign of fear could be traced in the letter sent by the University official, in his direct rejection of Jude, if Jude a stone worker attain the University knowledge the education as a domain of elite people would possibly remove the hierarchy established by them; as Marx says when the class becomes aware of 'class consciousness' and prefers humanity over money then it entails the revolution in the society.

The class struggle exists in the struggle of power to control the Material, as Marx claims in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) that the history of all human society both, past and present is a history of class struggle. 'A Tragedy of Two Ambitions', a short story in the collection *Life Little Ironies* (1894), appeared before *Jude the obscure*, however, the theme of education is identical with both the stories, and only certain elements are being used in particular ways to present the ethical variance behind each protagonist by anticipating the tragic end to both the stories. Jude and the two brothers encountered the problem of class division prevalent in university education because of the interchangeable nature of education with material wealth and the lack of amount of money which simply devastated them. The two brothers like Jude are self-taught fellows with very ambitious minds and are wholehearted practitioners; but interestingly what comprised their ideology was a malicious aspiration to raise their social ranking. They reflect biases in their treatment of people especially between a gipsy woman (married to their father)

and Mrs Fellmer since they have already been engulfed within a capitalist framework. However, Jude lacks such an element of bias even with animals and birds, which for him bear equal life and significance as a human, though he too is consisted of 'hamartia' ^[1]. Still his thirst for education was not to get store of learning, neither vanity of education but to acquire an association with true classical thinkers and poets and to transform into his true self, moreover, internally he is so much alike to Clym (of *The Return of the Native*) whose intentions were as pure and true as Jude's.

Although, University could have been accessible if the money would have been preserved safely by them, which was accumulated by their mother for them but unfortunately all the pennies were taken by their wastrel and drunkard father. The money becomes a prominent and indispensable factor in terms of education because the two brothers and Jude could have been possible to hire any skilled tutor for them if only they have possessed a good amount of money. Jude might have acquired the scholarship but he was not confident to contest those scholars, who were taught and guided by high paid tutors. Hence, these failures are the result of the superstructure of the society created by its economic base. The morality and practice of Victorian society were both results of the relation of production that functions the society. The dominance over the economy by one group produced a divided society, creating a stereotypical structure of the Institution and social mind-sets that are the requirements for the sustenance of power in the hands of the dominant class. Albeit, Jude could have acquired a trade apprenticeship and simply become a skilled architect remaining under the class limitation but his ambition was beyond the limit of a person of intermediate position, residing on the margins. Knowing the fact that the ambition could be self-destructive in its way Jude choose to be a 'fool' following 'his fancy'. And we witness that the protagonist does not withdraw himself from his earnest yearning. In the defeat of which, he ends up venting out his frustration on his last visit to Christminster on the Judgement Day.

Cornelius and Joshua being too ardent of their ambitions, eventually become sinners before the eyes of God and continued to live a hypocritical life. Hence, both ambitions have only entailed tragedy in their own manner. The transition from 'a city of light' to a depressing place of Jude's 'failure' was not because of the fate he was born with, rather an absolute choice of human will that choose to challenge the rigid convention created by humans. Jude is similar to Angel Claire, Hardy's other character from *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, on the ground of their mobility but the situations are different here. Where Jude is trying to shift from the working class to the scholarly community, Angel is stepping into farming rather than going to Cambridge for further study, unlike his father and brothers. The mobility is pretty easy for Claire due to his aristocratic position and the wealth he had already possessed from his father but the scenario alters when Jude seeks to attain the University education.

Subsequently, Hardy's characters, who are modern and rebellious in their thoughts meet their catastrophe at the end,

similarly, Jude meets his tragic end, which had started with educational failure to parting with Sue and dying a pitiful death. However, Hardy as the narrator stands on the side of characters to point on the rigidity of the contemporary society causing miserable atrocities for poor people. This novel was a challenge to the conventional Patriarchal discourse, with the question of marriage and sexuality along with the partial University education that was prevalent then, Hardy's modern thoughts as some critics have mentioned were 50 years ahead of his time like his characters Jude and Sue's. Through Jude, Hardy has meticulously deconstructed the society, especially certain sensitive issues, in response to which he had received many harsh comments from the conformists of the Victorian ideology. Education as an institution functioned as an instrument for the elevation of the upper-class people among society and to preserve their high status before the unprivileged lower class people. Jude's transgression of class limit, as indignantly informed by the scholar strikes his class consciousness in response to which he writes on a wall of that same college that, "I have understanding as well as you; I am not inferior to you: yea, who knoweth not things as these?" (Jude180). This shows his steadfast protest against the whole structure of the system that has suppressed the voice of the working class and every woman in all spheres. He seeks an answer for the unjust that the whole system has done. Correspondingly, in the review of *Jude, the obscure* in Saturday Review (Feb.8, 1896) H.G. Wells wrote, "That is the voice of the educated proletarian, speaking more distinctly than it has ever spoken before in English literature" ^[2]. He is certainly an embodiment of Hardy who is demanding an equal opportunity for every citizen to pursue University education; he is demanding to dissolve all the stereotype and partiality growing within society. Jude has carried out the voice of a frustrated person who is long despaired yet gives out a convincing speech about his suffering as working class. The Victorian society contained a class and gender bias in Educational sphere, due to the economic disparity between classes as well as gender and significantly, with the formation of a capitalist economy.

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¹ A tragic flaw of hero or heroine, here it is referred to his weakness towards resistance of alcohol.

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