

## **Feminist Identity Repression in Victorian Society through Thomas Hardy's "The Mayor of Casterbridge."**

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### **Summary:**

Thomas Hardy is widely acknowledged as one of the preeminent nineteenth-century British novelists. During the nineteenth century, women resided in an era marked by pervasive gender disparities. They enjoyed a restricted range of legal and social rights while being submissive to their dads or spouses. This study aims to investigate the representation of women as objects of trade inside Victorian society. A descriptive qualitative method was undertaken to investigate the research question in this study. All data were examined and analyzed through comprehending reading based on the related theory of radical feminism dating back to 1928. The findings indicate that female characters were subjected to oppression due to authority, power, and male domination during Hardy's time. The study concluded that These female characters become victims of men's domination power due to the oppressive nature of patriarchal culture. The study recommends further studies to examine the phenomenon of patriarchy and its pervasive influence on women; more studies need to be conducted to examine women who are subjected to domination within diverse societies, both in the Western and Eastern contexts.

### **Introduction:**

Thomas Hardy, a prominent English poet and novelist from 1840 to 1920, has been widely recognized as one of the most significant personalities in English literature (Sapkota, 2011). His masterpieces have gained significant recognition among readers and students of literature. He entered the realm of literature as an

exceptionally talented writer and intellectual of his period. Hardy authored a diverse range of novels, encompassing many genres such as tragedies, tragi-comedies, and comedies. The author conveyed his perspectives through his literary works. Hardy's Wessex Novels earned him the same fame as Sir Walter Scott's Waverly Novels (Rogers, 2001). He possesses exceptional mastery in the art of characterization. He has a profound and vast understanding of the complexities of human nature.

The literary work *The Mayor of Casterbridge* by Thomas Hardy (1886) explores the harsh realities of the Victorian Age (Hoffer, 2013), shedding light on the unforgiving nature of that particular era. Hardy wrote that women endured great suffering and were considered commodities (Shaffer, 2000). They had no rights because they were members of a patriarchal society. In order to fulfill their obligations to their families, women had to give up their desires. Such timid and submissive female characters can be seen throughout Hardy's writings (Pinion, 2016). They were even denied the right to select their life companions (Owen, 2004). All they were in a society run by a male-dominated. Victorian culture adhered to a set of dual standards regarding gender, wherein differential expectations and norms were imposed on males and females. Hardy's story demonstrates his preoccupation with the repression of women, as exemplified by the female characters Susan Henchard, Lucetta Templeman, and Elizabeth-Jane Newson.

Hardy, in most of his novels, frequently depicts unconventional women who are more intricate and captivating than their male counterparts (Bhattacharys, 2008). Numerous studies and reviews noted that Hardy's narrative consistently revolves around the experiences of a single woman in her interactions with two or three men. It is a deliberate aspect of the narrative structure that, while the men possess distinct characteristics, they are primarily introduced in relation to the women and fully explored only in their interactions with them. There is a possibility that Hardy's amazing capacity to represent vivid female characters was the aspect that prompted early reviewers to think that his writings were, in fact, written by a woman (Sandlin,

2011). The majority of critics are of the opinion that Hardy's characters are consistent with the widespread picture of women throughout the Victorian era. He frequently depicts women in their most admirable roles, which are those of spiritual counselor and caring nurturer.

During the Victorian Era, women's rights and opportunities were severely limited. They were perceived as being limited to the roles of homemakers and caregivers to their offspring. During this historical period, women were predominantly perceived as individuals whose primary responsibility revolved around maintaining a prosperous household. During the entirety of the Victorian era, women were subjected to a subordinate status in society compared to men (Tosh, 2008). Women had significant limitations in their social classes and professional environments, with much greater restrictions imposed upon them in the latter. The novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge* commences with a compelling opening scene that investigates the theme of female repression during the Victorian Era, highlighting its origins in the prevailing male domination of the time. In the story, the central character, Michael Henchard, engages in the act of auctioning off his wife, Susan, during a fair held in Weydon-Priors. This action is undertaken by Henchard while under the influence of alcohol. Henchard experiences a sense of unease until he successfully locates a purchaser for his spouse for the price of five guineas.

Various feminist critics hold differing perspectives on the portrayal of women. The author contends that feminism has transitioned into what is commonly referred to as the "women's movement," which is a collective effort aimed at opposing women's repressive and reevaluating societal standing. A study by Subrahmanian (2005) stated the perpetuation of stereotypes, constraints, and gender-based discrimination against women, as well as the historical expectations imposed by men on women's societal roles, according to Bressler and Freeman (1980), women frequently experience oppression and subordination at the hands of males. They concluded that feminist

ideology seeks to challenge this demeaning treatment by empowering women to recognize their societal responsibilities and strive for equality with men.

Moreover, the ideology of feminism serves as a conceptual framework for understanding women's roles in society, as depicted within literary compositions. Bressler's observation posits that the act of examining female characters within literary texts serves to illuminate the awareness of gender-based discrimination in the interpretation of such works. Hardy used discouraged and exploited female characters to underscore the greater adversity faced by women compared to males during his time. Hardy elicits the readers' sympathy by depicting the wretched circumstances of his female characters as a means of alleviating his emotional response to the societal norms prevalent during his age.

In summary, the notion of feminism offers a critique of the societal system that is structured along gender lines. Consequently, it contributes to forming social constructs of identity, wherein males are associated with traits such as masculinity and dominance, while women are predominantly associated with femininity and subservience (Mirchandani,1999). The feminist movement contends with the challenges of establishing its position and advocating for its rights within society. Jaggar (2005) thinks that radical feminism challenges the prevailing male dominance system by advocating for the rejection of traditional gender roles and attributing the subjugation of women to the fundamental structure of male domination. Radical feminism seeks to transcend the analysis of male dominance and progress toward developing a constructive vision for the state and society (Burstow, 1992).

As mentioned earlier, several studies have underlined the oppression faced by feminist identity during the Victorian era; however, few studies have measured the utilization of radical feminism to address the oppression faced by female characters. In this study, A descriptive qualitative method was undertaken to investigate the representation of women as objects of trade inside Victorian society. The research

question guiding this study was: How is women's identity oppressed as a commodity under male domination during Victorian traditions?

### **Significance of the study:**

Extensive scholarly research has been conducted on Thomas Hardy and the Victorian era. Several notable studies have been employed to enhance the investigation of human body matters. Within the chosen texts of this study, Hardy portrays a manifestation of male dominance over female characters through the exertion of authority and power. However, it is worth noting that he also appears to celebrate the agency and autonomy of his female characters. His depiction of despondent female characters seems to serve the purpose of elucidating the prevailing religious and societal influences throughout the Victorian era while also revealing his response to the values of that time.

This study employs the theoretical framework of radical feminism to analyze the themes of male control and oppression to investigate the strategies employed by female characters to resist and overcome the oppressive conditions prevalent in the Victorian era. The relevance of this radical feminist theory to the research lies in its incorporation of notions such as "confrontation" and "self-reliance" within the framework of radical feminism, as put out by Kate Millet, as a means of overcoming male domination and oppression towards feminist identity. A review of Hardy's works through the lens of radical feminism will contribute to the ongoing critique of the objectification of women during the Victorian traditions, shedding light on the perceived dominance of men and their influence on the societal framework of that time. Furthermore, this analysis aims to elucidate how Hardy's female protagonists effectively challenge the subconscious construction of feminine roles within the symbolic framework of the Victorian age.

This study aims to contribute to the current scholarly understanding by examining the scope of women's subjugation and acts of defiance as depicted in the literary work of Thomas Hardy. Various scholars have approached the examination of Hardy's literary

work from diverse perspectives, contributing to the contextualization of the present study within a broader framework aimed at enhancing our comprehension of the portrayal of women in the Victorian era. Hence, the findings of this research provide a substantial contribution to the existing body of literature on feminism.

### **Synopsis of the Novel :**

The literary work by Thomas Hardy, now known as "*The Mayor of Casterbridge*," was initially published under the title "The Life and Death of Mayor Caster Bridge". Michael Henchard is accompanied by his spouse, Susan, and their infant daughter on a journey searching for employment opportunities. Upon pausing to partake in a meal, Henchard gets drunk, and in an auction that commences as a jest but rapidly escalates in gravity, he sells his spouse and their infant progeny, Elizabeth-Jane, to Newson, a mariner, for the sum of five guineas. The following day, Henchard awakes with remorse for his actions and begins searching the neighborhood for his wife and kid. When he cannot locate them, he enters a church and solemnly vows that he will abstain from drinking alcohol for the next twenty-one years, which is the same amount of time that he has been alive.

### **Literature Review:**

This study aims to examine the perception of women in Victorian culture as objects devoid of agency, primarily within the context of male dominance prevalent in middle-class circles. This study will center on female repression, particularly emphasizing the exertion of male authority in regulating female income and social standing. This power dynamic has resulted in the marginalization of women from active participation in the public domain. The emergence of the middle classes in England throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries can be attributed to the transformative effects of the Industrial Revolution. The idea of domesticity is widely considered to have peaked in the mid-to-late Victorian era. In the Victorian era, the societal perception of women and their role as mothers was contingent upon the

presence and influence of males. The goal of bourgeois society was for women to be economically and socially dependent on males.

The Victorian era had its distinct socioeconomic strata. The life a woman led was determined by the social class to which she belonged. Within each socioeconomic category, the place that women occupied remained the same. They were not allowed to apply for a significant position. Women belonging to an elevated socioeconomic stratum who derived immense pleasure from their existence. Her routine consisted of spending time with her family and friends. Women belonging to the middle class were anticipated to engage in education and endeavor to secure marriages with individuals of noble lineage.

Conversely, women from the lower class faced significant economic hardships and experienced unjust treatment. They were limited to the option of engaging in labor in order to ensure their survival. According to (Gates, 1989), a woman in the era was nothing more than a bondservant within marriage. The matter was necessary, as women who lacked support from male-led households were deemed atypical and excluded from refined societal circles.

Male domination has been identified as a prominent and pervasive manifestation of inequality between men and women that has persisted throughout history (Godelier, 1981). Male dominance is predicated upon the distinction between biological sex and sociocultural gender. Sex is a biological categorization that distinguishes individuals as either male or female, whereas gender pertains to the societal construct that encompasses the unequal divide into femininity and masculinity. MacKinnon (1991) asserts that men have used every kind of compulsion that is available to them in order to construct women as victims of their actions. He distinguishes between three models of male dominance, the first of which is the physical model. Women who violate sexual expectations and try to behave independently are consistently at risk of being physically intimidated. This threat is not going away any time soon. Second, there is a financial advantage to male dominance.

Women are relegated to the position of being economically reliant, and as a result, they are denied the opportunity or the ability to live independently of men. Third, male power is legal, leaving women without the authority to oppose the sexuality-generated sexual stereotypes that are imposed on them through socialization and education. This is because these stereotypes are rooted in the fact that men dominate society. As a result, Male dominance has created a subjugated class of women who are unavoidably victims of male supremacy despite their unique circumstances, skills, and chances (Weisman, 1994). Therefore, women are denied opportunities and the possibility to establish an identity; they are bereft not just of options but of the very power to choose in a society that men dominate. In brief, Male domination is characterized by the systematic coercion exerted by men upon women, which restricts women's personal growth and relegates them to subordinate positions within society (Weisman, 1994). MacKinnon (1991) also contends that consciousness-raising is a method that can be used to put an end to male dominance over women. The consciousness-raising approach perceives the world by emphasizing the collective social existence of women rather than focusing on their individual views.

Radical feminism reduces society's understanding of "woman" to the female role in sexual contexts, diminishing that role to submissiveness and passivity. These social stereotypes acquire a political significance in the eyes of radical feminists since they work to prevent women from attaining equality in all areas of life, including the social, economic, political, and legal sectors. Legal regulations ensure that women's identities are created to satisfy that need, while social norms demand that women make their sexuality available to men. However, the studies have only looked at the role of women in the Victorian era and the authority of male dominance, and none have looked at repressive regimes toward feminist identity in Victorian society. Therefore, more studies are needed to investigate the authority of male dominance during the Victorian era and the representation of women as objects of trade inside Victorian society.



**Research Design:**

The researcher has employed a qualitative methodology for conducting this research since it is commonly utilized in the literature. The qualitative methodology employed in research encompasses various techniques such as observations, textual analysis, and interviews (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research primarily focuses on the analysis and interpretation of statements and ideas. This tool enables a researcher to investigate concepts and firsthand encounters comprehensively.

**Data source:**

The data utilized in this study were extracted from the literary work titled "*The Mayor of Casterbridge*," authored by Thomas Hardy. This novel has achieved significant commercial success, becoming a bestseller and gaining widespread recognition among a global audience. The publication occurred in the year 1975.

**Data Collection Technique:**

Data gathering is regarded as the primary procedure for conducting any investigation. Johnston (2014) asserted that Data collection is a systematic method of collecting and measuring data gathered from different sources of information in order to provide answers to relevant questions. The data collection process will involve many novel readings, focusing on identifying and selecting specific words or phrases used by the characters and the individuals as the primary data. The secondary data utilized in this study was derived from a diverse range of sources, including books, articles, websites, Britannica, and other reputable references. The researcher collects and utilizes secondary data due to its relevance to the topic matter. In conjunction with employing library research as a means of data collection, the researcher utilizes the internet to procure further material after reading.

**Data Analysis Technique:**

The data collected has been subjected to descriptive qualitative analysis by the researcher, who has detailed the findings. Extensive analysis is conducted on the characters of Susan, Elizabeth-Jane, and Lucetta Templeman. The researcher's

investigation of the acts and decisions made by Susan enabled a deeper understanding of the extent to which this character grappled with oppression and sought to attain personal freedom. All data was examined and analyzed through comprehending reading based on the related theory of radical feminism dating back to 1928. After that, the data were analyzed and described using feminist identity during the Victorian era as the basis for interpretation. Using this methodology, the researcher has successfully done the study and obtained the findings on the subject under investigation.

### **Analysis and Findings:**

In Victorian society, the position of women was frequently one of subjugation and dominance by male power and authority. This was common practice during the period. The most significant result of this treatment has been to systematically deprive women and limit their ability to explore their capabilities, desires, and wants as women. It has also inadvertently formed a line of identification between men and women. According to Eva, women are depicted negatively within Victorian culture through the conception that associates them with traits such as obedience, passivity, and powerlessness.

In contrast, men are more commonly connected with attributes such as activity, power, and superiority. Because of all these characteristics, men's identities have traditionally been given more weight than women's. In Victorian culture, male privilege is encouraged to be dominant (male-centered) (Jones, 2005). The observations mentioned above can be found in Thomas Hardy's books. In his depictions of the Victorian era, he shows women being subjugated by the authority and power wielded by men. The female protagonist in "*The Mayor of Casterbridge*" is forced to confront the challenging circumstance of being exploited by the authority that men hold in both society and the home environment. The power of men exerts an oppressive force on women. When men want to portray women as objects and victims of masculine behavior, this is a form of oppression against women.

Henchard is responsible for these actions, whose pessimistic symbolic language is evident in his discourse. Furthermore, Henchard establishes a subordinate place for his wife, Susan, inside the cultural framework of the Victorian symbolic order, constructing her subjectivity as inherently inferior. "I will sell her for five guineas to any man that will pay me the money and treat her well, and he shall have her forever and never hear aught o' me". However, "she shan't go for less". Now then—five guineas—and she is yours" (Mayor 13). Susan was shown as an item. The rules of the symbolic society demolish her subjectivity.

In addition to controlling his wife, Henchard also dominates Elizabeth-Jane, his daughter. The person in issue tries to control how society perceives Elizabeth, giving particular weight to legalese that is developed within the parameters of the laws and customs that are common in that symbolic society. This is evident when he criticizes Elizabeth's accent and even looks at her penmanship. As illustrated in the passage, Elizabeth introduces a series of chain shots and sandbags; the character experiences a reddening of his face due to feelings of indignant guilt on her behalf. He promptly declares, "Never mind—I will finish it," and dismisses her immediately (Mayor 131). The representation of Elizabeth's sense of self is presented as a commodity in the construction of Henchard's subconscious. He employs his position of power to ensure adherence to his rules and regulations. The extent of her oppression becomes evident by the expression: "Oh, I desire to be deceased alongside beloved mother!" Mayor (137).

In Hardy's literary work, Lucetta Templeman assumes the role of the third female protagonist whose subjective experience is systematically dismantled, making a mere object within the symbolic framework. Henchard starts dating Lucetta after being elected mayor of Casterbridge. Lucetta aspires to marry him and has faith in his love. While Susan is away, she looks after Henchard for eighteen years. However, Henchard deserts her and chooses to wed Susan once more. Lucetta has immense distress within the metaphorical court system, where her individuality is disregarded, and she is

reduced to being seen solely as a sexual object after enduring eighteen years of living with a false perception. Hence, Susan, Elizabeth, and Lucetta all fall prey to the oppressive nature of patriarchal culture since they are subjected to sacrifice within this societal framework. The utilization mentioned above of radical feminist ideas elucidates how subjectivity is repressed within Victorian cultural conventions, reducing individuals' identities to simple commodities.

The manifestation of Susan's consciousness of her maternal status is evident when she is "breaking the silence, resulting in her low, parched voice resonating with a heightened volume (Mayor 14). Henchard's reaction is one of "concern" and confusion—"as if, after all, he had not quite anticipated this ending; and some of the guests laughed" (15). The letter she composes to Henchard demonstrates her utilization of her maternal capacity as a means of empowerment. In this letter, she explicitly declares that the current Elizabeth-Jane was not the same child in her arms when Henchard sold her. She further reveals that the original Elizabeth-Jane died three months after the sale, and the present child is the offspring of her subsequent husband (Mayor 125). In the end, Susan's pregnancy poses a threat that brings about a sense of unease in the symbolic realm. During this period of maternity, they challenge the symbolic patriarchal perspective prevalent in the Victorian era.

Going back to the study's research question, "How were feminists' identities oppressed as a commodity within male domination during the Victorian traditions"?, the response shows that it has been made clear that Susan, Elizabeth, and Lucetta all adopt new identities that are more advantageous to the male domination. Their identity becomes intertwined with the ideals and meanings of the symbolic norms and the strength that the phallus and metaphor bestow upon them. In Victorian society, individuals were anticipated to exhibit a dearth of subjectivity. It was demonstrated that theoretic work supports the idea that Hardy's heroines can achieve some degree of emancipation within the Victorian symbolic order and that radical feminism

concepts did contribute to the study of the unconscious in building women's identities in Victorian society.

The findings also indicate that the study mentioned above can predict how women were portrayed in Victorian society during Thomas Hardy's lifetime, particularly in the middle of the 19th century. The identities of Susan, Elizabeth, and Lucetta are all altered to ones that most effectively uphold the patriarchy. Their sense of self becomes intertwined with the significance and principles of the symbolic regulations and the authority that the metaphor and phallus bestow upon them. In order to thrive in Victorian culture, individuals were expected to exhibit a notable absence of subjectivity. Hardy has avoided depicting the female characters as helpless, obedient, and subservient. He has distinctly shaped his characters into fearless people who have demonstrated their resistance to the traditions of masculine dominance. In his work, Thomas Hardy critically examines the concept of "freedom or liberation" advocated by radical feminists. He sheds light on the societal construction of gender roles and the inherent prejudices associated with them, particularly with the aspirations of modern women for independence. In summary, Hardy's literary works endorse the advocacy of radical feminists in their endeavor to confront and emancipate women from the oppression, subjugation, and exploitation imposed by male hegemony.

Additionally, the findings of this study would like to imply that Victorian values continue to be upheld in the sense that women are still regarded as commodities even in modern times. This study, on the other hand, makes an effort to dismantle the wrong historical, cultural, and social perspectives of women by utilizing the fixed norm point of view of women. This study also shows the issue that advocates for women's rights have, which is that women possess numerous abilities, capabilities, and talented attributes that are comparable to those of males. In some instances, women can even demonstrate their superiority over men, as demonstrated by the performances of the heroines in Hardy's novels.

**Conclusion:**

As mentioned in the study, the objective is to investigate the representation of women as objects of trade inside Victorian society. This objective is used to explore Hardy's female characters resisting male domination due to authority and power. In order to discover the issue above, the researcher applied the concept of radical feminism, such as confrontation and self-reliance.

The analysis discussed in the section before this one showed that Hardy indicated that female characters in "*The Mayor of Casterbridge*" were subjected to oppression due to authority, power, and male domination, as experienced by Elizabeth, Susan, and Lucetta. Henchered used his authority to maintain social status and domination in domestic areas and Victorian society. These female characters become victims of men's domination power. Hence, Susan, Elizabeth, and Lucetta all fall prey to the oppressive nature of patriarchal culture. For Susan, Henchard establishes a subordinate place for his wife inside the cultural framework of the Victorian symbolic order, constructing her subjectivity as inherently inferior. In addition to controlling his wife, Henchard also dominates Elizabeth-Jane, his daughter. This is apparent when he offers criticism of Elizabeth's accent and takes notice of her calligraphy. In another situation, Lucetta's ordeal within the symbolic judicial system, she loses her subjectivity and classification as a sexual commodity due to spending eighteen years living with a false perception of herself. It has been elucidated that women possess a certain capacity to dismantle the symbolic, patriarchal realm. Overall, Hardy has adeptly crafted his characters to possess great strength. The author has prompted readers to contemplate the cultural norms prevalent during the Victorian era, encouraging them to question and revitalize those conventions that have become deeply ingrained in our contemporary society. This work critically examines the techniques of male domination that have oppressed and subjugated women. Lim examines the connections between the ideas of "freedom" within Radical Feminism

and the construction of gender norms. The radical feminist argues that a genuine feminist would commend their initiative.

The study recommends further studies to examine the phenomenon of patriarchy and its pervasive influence on women and analyze the diverse strategies women employ to challenge and counteract this system of oppression. Other studies may be conducted to examine women subjected to domination within diverse societies, both in the Western and Eastern contexts. They may raise inquiries regarding female resistance towards such forms of control.

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## قمع الهوية النسوية في المجتمع الفكتوري من خلال توماس هاردي عمدة كاستربرج

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### الملخص:

توماس هاردي احد الروائيين البريطانيين المعروفين في القرن التاسع عشر، خلال القرن التاسع عشر عاشت النساء في حقبة تميزت بالفوارق بين الجنسين تمتعت النساء بنطاق مقيد من القوانين والانظمة الاجتماعية بينما بقيت النساء ملزمة وخاضعة لابائهن وازواجهن تهدف هذه الدراسة الى دراسة تمثيل المرأة كسلع تجارية داخل المجتمع الفكتوري. تم استخدام المنهج الوصفي النوعي لدراسة سؤال البحث في هذه الدراسة تم فحص جميع البيانات وتحليلها من خلال القراءة الفهمية بناء على النظرية الراديكالية ذات الصلة والتي يعود تاريخها الى عام 1928 وتشير النتائج الى ان الشخصيات النسائية قد تعرضت للقمع بسبب السلطة القوة وسيطرة الرجال في زمن هاردي واستنتجت الدراسة الى ان هذه الشخصيات النسائية اصبحت ضحية لهيمنة الرجال ذات الطبيعة القمعية في الثقافة الابوية وتوصي الدراسة باجراء المزيد من الدراسات لدراسة ظاهرة السلطة الابوية وتأثيرها المتفشي على المرأة فهناك حاجة الى اجراء المزيد من الدراسات لفحص النساء اللاتي يتعرضن للهيمنة داخل المجتمعات المتنوعة سواء في السياق الغربي او الشرقي.