

Elizabeth Jane—An Independent Woman

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Abstract

Thomas Hardy is one of the most important British novelists who have made great contribution to the English literary history. In his life, he created many impressive literary figures, most of whom are men with tragic endings, including Henchard the mayor in *the Mayor of Casterbridge*. Hardy is not a feminist, but with a detailed reading of his novels, his concern for the women in the patriarchal society is obvious. He really cares about women's destiny in his novels. Both New and Traditional women are described in his works; however, most of the women in his works have tragic endings except Elizabeth Jane in *the Mayor of Casterbridge*. This paper will interpret the novel from the perspective of Elizabeth Jane. It will explore the factors that lead to the happy ending for Elizabeth. Her unique upbringing, her passion for knowledge, her fighting spirit all make her a remarkable independent woman in the novel.

Keywords: *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Elizabeth Jane, an Independent Woman

1. Introduction

Thomas Hardy is regarded as the great writer in British Victorian period. With the awakening of feminist awareness, he has created many classic and impressive female images in his novels. Although he is not a feminist writer, he shows great concern for the life of women in the patriarchal society. During the Victorian Age, women are oppressed under the patriarchal system and have no social status in the society. The women are expected to be the Angel in the house to take care of the husband and family. Hardy believed that the traditional women in the patriarchal society are doomed to suffer tragic fates due to their femininities which are imposed by the society since they are born. Hardy believes that the only way for women to achieve happiness is to be independent economically and spiritually. Elizabeth Jane in the *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is such an independent woman.

Since the publication of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, it has received wide attentions from the reviewers. The critics mainly focused on its text, writing skills, tragic theme and archetype of the roles. John Paterson explores the tragedy characteristics in the novel in the paper "*The Mayor of Casterbridge*" as Tragedy (1959), Julian Moynahan researches on the bible prototype of the novel in her paper *The Mayor of Casterbridge and the Old Testament's First Book of Samuel: A Study of Some Literary Relationships* (1956). Elain Showalter explores the novel from the perspective of feminist in *The Unmanning of The Mayor of Casterbridge* in 1979. However, very few scholars focus on the difficult situations women faced in the patriarchal society in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. This paper tries to analyze Elizabeth Jane in the novel from the perspective of a New Woman in the patriarchal society. As an independent woman in the novel, it is worthwhile to have a detailed analysis of her to find out the reasons for her Independence.

In the Victorian age, women were oppressed by the society, and they had no social status. In Hardy's novel, Hardy showed great sympathy and concern to the living conditions of women in the patriarchal society. In the paper, Elizabeth Jane was analyzed from the perspective of feminism, and Hardy's awakening of female consciousness was clearly presented by his description of Elizabeth Jane, which was embodied in Elizabeth Jane's ability to the resistance of unfair treatments and struggle for better life on her own. This paper mainly explores the reasons for Elizabeth Jane's independence from the perspective of feminism.

2. Elizabeth Jane's Unique Upbringing

In the beginning of *the Mayor of Casterbridge*, Henchard's unforgivable sin of selling his wife and daughter for five guineas to a passing sailor after drinking is shocking to the readers. And readers immediately sympathize

with the miserable conditions of traditional women like Susan in the patriarchal society while criticizing the cruelty of Henchard. Hardy described Henchard as an impulsive man who has no respect for women and regards women as the personal possessions of men which can be traded at the fair. Henchard did not love Susan, and his first marriage with Susan was a mistake, and his second marriage with her was just a compensational act which brought not happiness but only endless torments to both him and Susan. After Susan died, he opened her letter which was told not to be read before Elizabeth Jane's wedding. Both Henchard and readers were startled to find the true identity of Elizabeth Jane. Elizabeth Jane was not the child in her mother's arm when Henchard made the deal at the fair. The true Elizabeth Jane died three months after Henchard sold her and her mother in the transaction. The Elizabeth Jane is Elizabeth Jane Newson, the daughter of Susan and Newson.

When Susan was sold to Newson, people at the fair believed that she would be better off because "For seafaring natures be very good for shorn lambs, and the man do seem to have plenty of money, which is what she's not been used to lately, by all showings" (Hardy, 2010, p. 14). Lames symbolize the weak ones who need protections from the stronger ones. In the patriarchal society, women always belonged to the weak group who need the protections from the men. In the patriarchal society, women seldom went out to work, and the education they received since childhood did not allow them to get a job in the society. Men dominated the society and set out rules for women to obey. Any female actions which would threaten the men's superior role in the society were not allowed. For a woman who wanted to live happily in the patriarchal society, the only choice was to depend on the men's protection. Without the protections and supports from the men, women would be vulnerable and abandoned by the society. Elizabeth Jane, as a little girl, also needs the protections.

When Elizabeth Jane was a little girl, she spent a lot of time at the seaside. Her family had to move from one place to another because her father was a sailor. They first moved to Canada without any improvement of their life, so after several years of frustration with foreign life, they moved back to England. As a child, Elizabeth Jane benefitted a lot from unique experiences of living by the seaside. Life by the seaside was very different from the old-fashioned life inland which was dominated and controlled by men. As the only child in the family, she stayed with her mother most of the time because her father had to work at sea to make a living. Gender discrimination and old-fashioned social customs have little impact on the formation of Elizabeth Jane's characteristics. Elizabeth Jane fully developed her own unique and independent characters without any interference from the society. She has no awareness that she is different from any other children including the boys. She believed that she can do everything and she is totally equal with boys.

Elizabeth has a strong sense of independence since her childhood because the old-fashioned patriarchal society exerts little influence on her life. Life by the seaside is free and independent, both men and women at the seaside have to rely on each other to support their life, they are equal in the family at the seaside because both of them have to work to live, women do not need to rely on men for a living, women can support themselves and family with their own hands. Husbands always go out at sea to make a living, and wives work at shore to take care of their families while help their husbands at the same time. Social division of labour is relatively fair at the seaside. Women are in no ways inferior to men, and they have to rely on each other. As Elizabeth Jane lives in such a circumstance that she has unique and independent characteristics which are very important for her life subsequent. She holds the belief that she is an equal and independent existent in the world, and she can achieve everything as long as she wants to.

Living by the seaside and moves from place to place enrich Elizabeth Jane's horizon. Her mind is not restricted in a narrow space, her broad mind benefits a lot from her experiences in childhood. And any traditional customs in some particular places have no great impacts on her life as she had to move from place to place with her family. As Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* pointed out that the femininity of a woman is not born but imparted by the family and society in her growing process (Beauvoir, 1953). Education from the family and society determines the circumstances of women in the family and society. Boys and girls have no differences in the first two or three years, the family and society treat them equally when they are small. However, as they grow older, people's attitudes toward boys and girls change as they have different expectations on them. People tend to be more kind and patient towards the girls, and be brutal and strict towards the boys. Boys are urged to be brave and independent like "a little man". And girls will get more kisses and love as they grow older. The reason why they are treated differently as they grow older is that people have higher expectations on boys in the traditional patriarchal society. Boys are expected to be independent and strong enough to support the whole family while girls are expected to be caring and take care of the family. Therefore, boys gradually form a sense of pride and superiority because of their gender, and girls gradually have a sense of inferiority in their characteristics. It is lucky for Elizabeth Jane to live by the seaside with her mother. The traditional social prejudices have little impact on her, and she is encouraged to be independent like boys in her childhood. Her mother, unlike any other

mothers in the patriarchal society who would restrain the curiosity and initiative of their daughters, she encourages Elizabeth to explore the world independently and bravely. She is unwilling to force her daughter to be docile and submissive to men like her, she wants her daughter to be independent and she is willing to sacrifice herself to help Elizabeth Jane to live comfortably and happily. Therefore, Elizabeth Jane grows to be an independent woman due to her unique upbringing.

3. Elizabeth Jane's Passion for Knowledge

Elizabeth Jane has a strong passion for knowledge, and she tries to improve herself by reading all through the novel. Since she is still a child, she has already developed a strong passion for knowledge.

The woman had long perceived how zealously and constantly the young mind of her companion was struggling for enlargement; and yet now, in her eighteenth year, it still remained but little unfolded. The desire—sober and repressed—of Elizabeth-Jane's heart was indeed to see, to hear, and to understand. How could she become a woman of wider knowledge, higher repute—"better," as she termed it—this was her constant inquiry of her mother. She sought further into things than other girls in her position ever did, and her mother groaned as she felt she could not aid in the search. (Hardy, 2010, p. 30)

Because of the education she received from her mother, she grows out to be an independent girl with a strong desire for knowledge. Her dream was not to be a beautiful and elegant lady who totally depends on the men. She was eager to be a woman of broad knowledge who can live independently and elegantly. And her definition of "a better woman" is very different from other women of her age, her standard of a good woman is knowledge and reputation which were also her persistent pursuit. It was lucky for Elizabeth to have a mother like Susan who could do anything to help her in her constant pursuit of knowledge. Susan gave up her pride and remarried Henchard because of her daughter when Newson "died" at sea. As a traditional woman, Susan can not give her daughter a comfortable life without men, she chose to marry Henchard again only for the sake of Elizabeth Jane. And she deliberately hides the true identity of Elizabeth so that Elizabeth can get all the love and indulgence from Henchard. Elizabeth Jane benefits a lot from the exuberant life after Henchard married her mother again and she got the higher social position of being the stepdaughter of the mayor of Casterbridge.

The affluent life which her mother's marriage brought to her means that she can get all the nice and beautiful dresses and ornaments, but she did not miss herself by indulging in buying new dresses to beautify her appearance. She was afraid of making fool of herself by exaggerating appearance. Deeper in her mind, she regarded herself as "an unfinished girl" (Hardy, 2010, p. 113). She had a sense of inferiority not because of her gender, but because she can not talk Italian, she did not know how to use globes, and she did not show any accomplishments girls learn at boarding school of her age. So she decided to pay more attention to her self improvement. She sold her beautiful dresses and shining ornaments to buy books and bought herself grammar books, dictionaries and a history of all the philosophers (Hardy, 2010, p. 113). She spent a lot of time in reading books and self-improvements rather than dressing beautifully to please the people around her including the man she loved. As a woman in love, she never thought of attracting the men by her beautiful appearance, she wanted to be loved because of her creative ideas and deep thoughts. A woman with only beautiful looks is "an unfinished girl" to Elizabeth, her definition of "a finished girl" is the girl who can speak foreign languages fluently, and exchange creative ideas with men. "A finished girl" is a girl rich and elegant inside who have slight need for beautiful objects outside to Elizabeth Jane.

Elizabeth Jane never gave up reading and self-improvement even when she was in difficulties. Her mother's death is a great strike to Elizabeth which changed her life. Henchard found out the true identity of her and be very cruel to her afterwards. She was blamed for her use of dialect words, her bold man-like writing and her sympathy to the poor people. Henchard was intolerable of any tiny flaws of Elizabeth since he knew that Elizabeth was not her daughter. He believed that Susan and Elizabeth had changed his luck and brought misfortunes and disaster to his life. He wanted to get rid of Elizabeth as soon as possible. However, the irony was that Elizabeth knew nothing about her true identity. When she made the determination to treat Henchard as the true father, she was not welcomed but repelled. During this period, Elizabeth buried herself in reading to drive away the sadness brought to her by his stepfather. Her reading helped her to get through the difficulties and overcame the loneliness in her heart. She was no longer emotional like any other girls, but became more rational and peaceful inside.

She read and took notes incessantly, mastering facts with painful laboriousness, but never flinching from her self-imposed task. She began the study of Latin, incited by the Roman characteristics of the town she lived in. "If I am not well-informed it shall be by no fault of my own" (Hardy, 2010, p. 157)

Elizabeth Jane wanted to be an independent woman with rich thoughts, and she was not willing to be influenced by man. Being different from most girls of her age, she never allowed her feelings to control her actions. She kept on reading and improving herself even when she knew that Lucetta loved the same man with her. She tried her best to conceal her true feelings towards Farfrae and even gave suggestions to Lucetta on how to get along with Farfrae. Reading during this period helped her to overcome the loneliness and sadness. “So she viewed with an approach to equanimity the new cancelled days when Donald had been her undeclared lover, and wondered what unwished-for thing Heaven might send her in place of him” (Hardy, 2010, p. 211). With the education she received and the books she read, she can be rational towards love and wait peacefully for the right man for her.

4. Elizabeth Jane’s Fighting Spirit

Due to her unique upbringing, Elizabeth Jane grows up with no awareness of gender discrimination imparted on women by society. She is independent and believes that she can be better and well-educated by her own efforts. She did not rely on men for a better life. Since she is still young, she firmly believes that she can support herself and be a well-educated woman with her own hands. When she came to Casterbridge, she worked at Three Mariners to pay their bills regardless of her comfort and dignity. “If there was one good thing than another which characterized this single hearted girl it was a willingness to sacrifice her personal comfort and dignity to the common weal” (Hardy, 2010, p. 51). When faced with difficulties, Elizabeth Jane never complains but endeavored to find a way out of the hardship with her own efforts.

To Elizabeth, independence is more important than anything else. She never lost herself in pursuing freedom. She dared to revolt against the men for her freedom. She respected men in his life, two men were important to her, one is Henchard, the other one is Farfrae, however, she never model herself upon them, and she never gave up her own standards and bottom lines. To her stepfather, she is considerate and caring, she used to change herself to meet his requirement, but failed to satisfy him when he knew her true identity, and she was brave to revolt against Henchard when she got the chance. The first fight happened when she was going to leave Henchard’s house to live with Lucetta, Henchard asked her to stay, but to his disappointment, she refused for her liberty, she did not want to stay in the awkward and unbearable situation at the sacrifice of her own freedom. The second fight occurred in Lucetta’s house when Henchard compelled her to marry him. Elizabeth Jane was courageous enough to stand up for Lucetta. “What dreadful thing drives her to say this, father, when it is such a pain to her? Don’t compel her to do anything against her will! I have lived with her, and know that she can not bear much” (Hardy, 2010, p. 231).

To Elizabeth Jane, her fighting spirit helped her to gain liberation in the man dominated society. She is reasonable in interacting with men, she never deemed herself to be subordinate to men like her mother and Lucetta, and she would never give up herself to please the men including her lover. She was very certain about what she could do to gain happiness. Elizabeth Jane constantly reminds herself of the poverty and oppressions her mother and her used to experience which suppress herself from indulging in the affluent and comfortable life. No matter how hard the surrounding environment is for her, she can still pursue her dream and insisted it. She behaved like the man without any traces of weakness. Only with the fighting spirit can she break out the restraints that has imposed on her by the family and society, and emancipate her mind to be a unique and equal existent with her own rich and deep ideas.

5. Conclusion

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Hardy presents to us the difficult situations women faced in the patriarchal society, and Hardy firmly pointed out that the only way for a woman to achieve liberation and happiness in the traditional world was to be independent. Of all the women in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, only Elizabeth Jane meet the requirement of being an independent woman: a unique upbringing with independent education, the incessant pursuit of knowledge and persistent fighting spirit for happy life. Therefore, there is not doubt that only Elizabeth Jane as an independent woman receives happiness in the end of the novel.

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