
Voice Of Revolt, Ache Of Loneliness And Feeling Of Discontentment In Thomas Hardy's *The Return Of The Native*

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Abstract

In *The Return of the Native*, the novelist, Thomas Hardy to exhibit the idea that voice of revolt, ache of loneliness and alienation and feeling of discontentment with what is and yearning for what is not disturb and create ripples in the placid country life of Wessex, the semi-fictional region, through the psyche, sensitivity and sensibility of different characters in the novel. Throughout the story of the novel we perceive that alienation and seclusion from the set social norms lead to loneliness and loneliness lead to the feeling of discontentment that finally encourages a voice of revolt to prove one's existential and social identity.

Keywords:- Revolt, Loneliness, Discontentment, Isolation, Pessimism, Frustration, Glamour.

Introduction

Thomas Hardy, who is regarded as one of the greatest English novelists; and known for his pessimistic philosophy of life, seems to bring new pressures to bear upon his semi-fictional world of Wessex in *The Return of the Native*. The personal experiences of any literary artist play a formidable role in framing and shaping his ideas that he depicts in his works. Hardy's pessimism, including his alienation and his dissatisfaction, is an offshoot of his own struggling experiences of life. In *The Return of the Native*, Hardy appears to be trying to exhibit the idea that voice of revolt, ache of loneliness and alienation and feeling of discontentment with what is and yearning for what is not disturb and create ripples in the placid country life of Wessex. Egdon Heath, in the novel, is itself a character and also a symbol of loneliness and indifferent nature. The novelist seems to create Egdon Heath as a symbol of cosmic indifference to man. Throughout the novel all the characters are reminded of their existential loneliness by the ghastly wind blowing across the heath.

Egdon Heath, in the novel, is a dreary place situated in the most sequestered parish. Eustacia Vye, the heroine of the novel, struggles against the isolation of the heath life. She is not able to accommodate with the life on heath. She finds the heath similar to a prison where her aspirations end in frustration. Everything on the heath, as the atmosphere, the people, the landscapes and the scenes, is foreign to her taste. She, being a girl with romantic temperament, is dissatisfied with the dry, harsh, insipid and the curt heath life. It being no large village or even a hamlet, the people of heath live in lonely cottages. There is no market-town in the neighbourhood too. The people of heath undergo buffets of howling wind in tempestuous weather. The unadorned simplicity of nature on heath has no charm for Eustacia who is fond of splendour, glamour and brilliance of city life. Being compelled to live at lonely

heath by force of circumstances, though born at a fashionable seaside resort Budmouth, she feel herself to be like one exiled. As the narrator narrates:

Egdon was her Hades, and since coming there she had imbibed much of what was dark in its tone, though inwardly and eternally unreconciled thereto. Her appearance accorded well with this smouldering rebelliousness, and the shady splendour of her beauty was the real surface of the sad and stifled warmth within her. (*The Return of the Native*, 77)

Captain Vye, undoubtedly, is her guardian but he keeps himself to himself and leaves her to herself. The absence of parental love and control makes her accustomed to being her own mistress living a life at liberty and having nothing to occupy her mind or body. Living a socially alienated, lonely and discontented life at Egdon Heath she feels an intense desire to be loved to madness. To her love is the one cordial “which could drive away the eating loneliness of her days.” (*The Return of the Native*, 79) She seems to long for a passionate love, as one in a desert would be thankful for brackish water. She feels herself so much choked, lonely, estranged and discontented that she utters the prayer, “O deliver my heart from this fearful gloom and loneliness: send me great love from somewhere, else I shall die.” (*The Return of the Native*, 80) She adopts a state of rebellion raising voice of revolt against her estranged life on the heath. This kind of Eustacia’s attitude reveals her instincts towards social nonconformity. She is a stranger to all local gatherings and does not participate in them at all. Living an alienated and lonely life on the heath her aspirations and intense feelings to enjoy the pleasures of a glamorous city life remain unfulfilled and discontented throughout the novel. Her hatred and discontentment of the heath life and her desire to escape from its boredom prompt her to love Clym, who has returned for Paris, with a hope of marrying him and to be settled in Paris finally. Soon, Clym recognizes her true nature and says, “You are ambitious, Eustacia—no, not exactly ambitious, luxurious.” (*The Return of the Native*, 235) In the core of her hearts she cherishes desire of enjoying fashionable life of Paris in the event of marriage with Clym. Eustacia’s yearning for the distant glamorous city of Paris has its parallel in the idealism of Clym, who wants to the heathman. Her revolt against the heath life and her yearning for the Parisian life is nothing but her discontentment and failure to identify herself culturally with her immediate environment. Ultimately this yearning and failure ruin her marriage with Clym. Eustacia does not have any sympathetic understanding with the people of the heath. “To dwell on a heath without studying its meaning was like wedding a foreigner without learning his tongue. The subtle beauties of the heath were lost to Eustacia, she only caught its vapours.” (*The Return of the Native*, 81) When Clym asks for her help in the execution of his mission to educate the people of heath, she says reluctantly, “I don’t quite feel anxious to. I have not much love for my fellow creatures. Sometimes I quite hate them.” (*The Return of the Native*, 219) She further says, “I cannot endure the heath, except in its purple season. The heath is a cruel taskmaster to me.” (*The Return of the Native*, 220) This shows that she is completely discontented with the people with whom she lives and with the environment, which she exists in. Her seclusion and exclusion from social participation reflect her discomfort, uneasiness, discontentment and her voice of revolt.

Ultimately, being tired of her struggle and revolt against alien surroundings on the heath, death appears to her as the only route to escape this undesired world full of loneliness and discontentment. And in the darkness of night she stumbles into the whirling weir pool and dies. In this way Eustacia

appears in the novel as a lonely, isolated and discontented character raising her voice of revolt against the situations, she has been placed in by the fateful circumstances. Norman Page observes, “From her first appearance in the novel, Eustacia strongly recalls Tennyson’s Mariana: Egdon is her moated grange, like Mariana she longs for an ideal lover who never materializes, and she only just fails to utter the cry that Mariana makes explicit: ‘I would that I were dead!’ Like Emma Bovary she cherishes romantic dreams that are doomed to disappointment and perhaps incapable of fulfilment: she longs to go to Paris like a Chekhov heroine pining for Moscow. (*Thomas Hardy Annual No. 3*,100)

Like Eustacia, Wildeve is also at odds with the heath; he is a new comer to the heath and does not have any sympathy with the people of the heath and their values. In his relationship with the heath he can be compared to Troy’s relationship with Weatherbury Farm in *Far From the Madding Crowd*. Like Troy he does not contribute to the life of the inhabitants of the heath, he merely takes advantage of their labour:

...Wildeve’s Patch, as it was called, (was) a plot of land redeemed from the heath, and after long and laborious years brought into cultivation. The man who had discovered that it could be tilled died of the labour: the man who succeeded him in possession ruined himself in fertilizing it. Wildeve came like Amerigo Vespucci, and received the honours due to those who had gone before. (*The Return of the Native*, 39-40)

His discontentment can be seen in his thinking that he is born for better things; but he is not seen to make any effort to achieve his desired aim. He has been presented as a non-productive, negative, uncommitted, rootless and lonely figure.

Clym’s attitude to the heath is in stark contrast to that of Eustacia and Wildeve. “Take all the varying hates felt by Eustacia Vye towards the heath, and translate them into loves, and you have the heart of Clym.” (*The Return of the Native*, 205) He is discontented with the glamorous city life in Paris, and returns back to Egdon Heath with a purpose to educate the people of the heath. When he returns to the heath, he finds its austerity and sombreness in harmony with his soul and asceticism. Heath is his natural home and he is its product. In the moments of disappointment heath is the source of his consolation, soothing and satisfaction. He says, “To my mind it is most exhilarating, and strengthening, and soothing. I would rather live on these hills than anywhere else in the world.” (*The Return of the Native*, 220) Clym’s belongingness to and identification with heath enables him to survive ordeals of his life and in the end he is seen preaching which is not far from his original scheme of educating the heath folk. His emotional adaptation to heath can be seen in contrast to Eustacia’s revolt against her situation which ultimately ends in her violent death. Clym’s relation to heath can be compared to Oak’s relation to nature in *Far From the Madding Crowd*. “He was permeated with its scenes, with its substance, and with its odours. He might be said to be its product. His eyes had first opened thereon; with its appearance all the first images of his memory were mingled; his estimate of life had been coloured by it...”(*The Return of the Native*, 205) Clym’s attraction towards the heath seems to be the result of his revolt against the so called modern and glamorous life in the urban areas.

Isolated Eustacia with an ache of loneliness and craving for love feels attracted towards Wildeve; but she loves him just “for want of a better object.” (*The Return of the Native*, 81) Her love for him is

not spontaneous; and sometimes she feels herself on the verge of revolt. “At moments her pride rebelled against her passion for him, and she even had longed to be free. But there was only one circumstance which could dislodge him, and that was the advent of a greater man.” (*The Return of the Native*, 81-82) And she finds this ‘great man’ in the form of Clym. Being discontented with Wildeve she revolts against her relations with him and marries Clym. Clym also raises his voice of revolt against his mother, who does not give her consent for his marriage with Eustacia. Eustacia marries Clym with a hope that she would convince him to leave the heath life and go back to live and enjoy a glamorous life in Paris. But, soon, she gets disillusioned to find that Clym cannot be persuaded to go back to Paris. This fall of expectations on both sides creates a breach between their relations. Both of them feel the ache of loneliness on account of this feeling of discontentment with each other. As the result, Eustacia revolts against her far from colourful married life. Lack of growth and adaptation seems to be the source of the tragedy of their married life. Clym remains committed to his ideas and Eustacia follows her own way of life. Temperamentally they have nothing in common. Elements of Clym’s philosophy run counter to Eustacia’s self-indulgent view of life. Eustacia’s self-indulgence, luxury and her ambition for colourful life of Paris are in opposition to his austerity, self-abnegation, endurance and fortitude. Leonrad W. Deen observes:

Eustacia’s and Clym’s excessively romantic and illusory married happiness is destroyed by some destructive forces. One of the essential destructive forces is, of course, their emotional and intellectual incompatibility. Hardy seems to have conceived Clym, at least in the beginning, as a kind of Hamlet—a superior mind and sensibility ravaged by that disease, thought, and misunderstood by the cruder world. Clym also has strong suggestions of the prophet who retires from a luxurious and self-indulgent society in order to criticize and to reform it; he intends to begin in the wilderness of the heath. His force as a prophet is considerably weakened, however, by his becoming the inevitable victim of a world whose worldliness he does not comprehend. He is a prophet of the future who fails to see how intractably primitive the world of Egdon Heath is. And as over-spiritualized modern man he is equally blind to Eustacia’s primitiveness. She is all pagan, self-assertion and passion; he has chosen the different way of self-denial and devotion to the good of others. The two almost become figures in an allegory of flesh and spirit, like the abstractly patterned interplay flesh and spirit (or perverse spirit) in *Jude the Obscure*. Eustacia is not only less spiritually pure than Clym; she has many of the masculine qualities—energy, aggressiveness, ambition, and promethean rebellion—which he lacks. If Eustacia is too fervid, Clym is too idealistic for life on earth, and suffers from blindness to the way of the world. (R.P.Draper, 126)

Though Eustacia is the root cause of alienation and discontentment between Clym and his mother, Mrs. Yeobright, her possessive love for her son, too, play a significant role to make them feel the ache of loneliness. When Clym leaves his mother’s house and passes through an enclosure of fir and beech trees towards his new cottage, the whole atmosphere seems to be in pain. “The wet young beeches were undergoing amputations, bruises, crippling, and harsh lacerations, from which the wasting sap would bleed for many a day to come, and which could leave scars visible till the day of their burning. Each stem was wrenched at the root, where it moved like a bone in its socket, and at every onset of the gale convulsive sounds came from the branches, as if pain were felt.” (*The Return of the Native*, 247) The convulsive sounds coming from the branches are, in fact, the convulsive sobs of the trees

emblematic of the inner cries of Clym who feels an ache of loneliness because of being estranged, not from his mother only, but from his own-self also.

Mrs. Yeobright undergoes the aches of loneliness and estrangement or alienation after her fruitless and humiliating journey to Clym's new cottage. She visits him with an object and great expectations of mending her relations with his son; but Eustacia shuts the door against her. This insulting behaviour of Eustacia breaks her heart deeply. Now she feels herself physically exhausted and emotionally isolated and lonely in this world. This undesired behaviour of Eustacia happens to be a fatal one for her life. Finally she dies with a feeling of discontentment and an ache of loneliness in the deep of her broken heart.

To conclude, it can be said that Thomas Hardy, in his *The Return of the Native*, seems to deal with the voice of revolt, ache of loneliness and feeling of discontentment comprehensively with the psyche, sensitivity and sensibility of different characters in the novel. Eustacia and Wildeve are not in tune with heath-life. They are always discontented; and raise voice of revolt against the set rules of society to lead a life of their fancy. Clym is revolts against Eustacia's will to go back to Paris to live a life of pleasures; and finally because of her estrangement from him, he feels the pangs of loneliness in this world. Mrs. Yeobright, being estranged from her beloved son, feels the pain of being isolated and lonely. And finally this loneliness of her leads her to a pathetic death.

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