
Class Consciousness And Social Discrimination In Thomas Hardy's *A Pair Of Blue Eyes*

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Abstract

The issue of class consciousness and social discrimination has always been one of the major themes in the works of literature and other arts in almost all the literary ages and languages. In *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, Thomas Hardy represents the contemporary Victorian era social conflicts and the status consciousness of the people of that time. Stephen Smith, the protagonist of the novel, is denied to marry, Elfride, the daughter of a Reverend Parson belonging to the superior and elevated strata of social structure. Knight, another character, has been presented as a highly educated and intellectually superior fellow. He is too fastidious and idealist to fit the practical social atmosphere of society; and seems not to be ready to compromise his whims and cynical ideals for the so called inferior worldly activities. In *A Pair of Blue Eyes* the theme of class consciousness and social discrimination has been depicted vividly.

Keywords:- Class Consciousness, Social Discrimination, Dejection, Status, Idealist, Vacillation Human Psyche.

Introduction

From the time immemorial, class consciousness and social discrimination on the basis of one's social category and one's social and financial status seems to have been an integral part of the human social system all over the globe. The literary artists, representing almost all the genres of literature, have always been trying to represent this social classification and status consciousness of the human world, which leads to discrimination finally, in their works. This discrimination on the basis of one's financial and social status, one's class, caste, creed and religion leads to dejection, frustration, alienation, isolation, dissatisfaction and, ultimately, revolt. As the result of this, pessimism dominates the psychological structure of the human mind, which is the real victim, obviously. In *A Pair of Blue Eyes* Thomas Hardy seems to represent this class consciousness and social discrimination through the portrayal of his various characters, representing human world with its psychology, sensitivity and sensibility, in the novel.

A Pair of Blue Eyes, published in 1873, appears to be Hardy's autobiographical novel, which seems to partake of some of the features of his earlier novels. It seems to draw upon his unpublished novel *The Poor Man and the Lady* particularly in the treatment of ambition and class conflict. It seems to have some of the complicated plotting of *Desperate Remedies* and some of the romance of *Under the Greenwood Tree*. The novel is mainly concerned with a love triangle, which ends with the tragic

death of the heroine in the wake of this status consciousness and discrimination prevalent in the human society.

The protagonist of the novel, Stephen Smith, though socially inferior, is an ambitious young architect who comes to Cornwall to make plans for restoring the ancient church. Here he happens to fall in love with Elfride, the daughter of Reverend Parson Christopher Swancourt. Parson Swancourt is an old man with a pretentious, ambitious and snobbish personality following his deep-seated social prejudices. In the beginning, when unaware of the inferior social status of Stephen, Swancourt encourages his love for his daughter Elfride. But when he comes to know that Stephen is the son of a master-mason of the neighbourhood, he refuses to approve of their match and ceases to look upon him as his favourite. This class-consciousness of Swancourt makes him crush the love of Elfride and the young architect, Stephen. The narrator comments on Parson Swancourt's behaviour:

It required no further effort to perceive what, indeed, reasoning might have foretold as the natural colour of a mind whose pleasures were taken amid genealogies, good dinners, and patrician reminiscences, that Mr. Swancourt's prejudices were too strong for his generosity, and that Stephen's moments as his friend and equal were numbered, or had even now ceased. (*A Pair of Blue Eyes*, 131)

Elfride protests her reluctant father and also requests him to allow their engagement because Stephen is a gentleman as good as her father. But the Parson does not yield to her daughter's request and says that the Swancourts belong to the prestigious clan of the Luxellians and he cannot allow the son of a village peasant to be his son-in-law. Elfride pins her hopes on Stephen's likely success in future but her father asks her to see what the young man is and not what he may be in future. He says that Stephen is the son of a working man in his parish. He further tries to convince Elfride that as Stephen's parents have been living in precisely the same spot in England as hers, she would always be known as the wife of Jack Smith, the mason's son, and not as the wife of a London professional man. Parson Swancourt tells Stephen that he is not to think of such a preposterous thing as marriage with Elfride. Here Parson Swancourt's attitude can be compared to that of Melbury, Grace's father, in *The Woodlanders*, who encourages his daughter's marriage with Fitzpiers particularly because the latter is a member of higher class in society. In *A Pair of Blue Eyes* Hardy seems to depict the frustrating and alienating effects of class consciousness and social discrimination.

As the story moves forward, Stephen and Elfride plan to elope and marry secretly so that they can never be separated. But, when they reach London, she vacillates over runaway marriage and returns back to Cornwall without being married. Her vacillation indicative of moral failure of nerve make us remember Sue Bridehead of *Jude the Obscure*. Stephen goes to India as an architect. When Elfride later sees Henry Knight, Stephen's mentor, who is attracted by her fresh innocence, she, too, feels feelings for him. On the other hand Stephen's passive assent to Elfride's return from London to Endelstow lowers down his value as an authoritative and possessive male in her estimate. Gradually, Henry Knight replaces Stephen Smith as Elfride's lover. She also becomes indifferent to her former lover and finds that the new one is a greater man than the first. She finds that Stephen does not possess so much of manhood as she would like her lover to have. Another reason of her estrangement from Stephen is that she is inconstant by nature. Stephen is also not able to possess her heart permanently.

He has got a peculiar habit of dispraising himself before her— “a peculiarity which, exercised towards sensible men, stirs a kindly chord of attachment that a marked assertiveness would leave untouched, but inevitably leads the most sensible woman in the world to undervalue him who practices it.” (*A Pair of Blue Eyes*, 314) It appears that poverty and inferior class of Stephen’s parents has nothing to do with Elfride’s indifference to him. But poverty becomes a negative point in view of the fact that sophisticated and graceful manners are not found in poor class. His parent’s rough clothes, manners and speeches being constantly observed by Elfride also contribute to her gradual estrangement and desertion from Stephen. Though she pretends to be indifferent toward Stephen’s lower social status, she seems not to be able to resist herself from discriminating sensibility, because it is in her blood and in her class, she has been brought up in. “The perception of his (Stephen’s) littleness beside Knight grew upon her alarmingly. She now thought how sound had been her father’s advice to her to give him up, and was as passionately desirous of following it as she had hitherto been averse.” (*A Pair of Blue Eyes*, 315) When Stephen returns back from India, she implores God to forgive her as she cannot or rather does not want to meet him. She tells her father that now there is no understanding between her and Stephen. She further tells him that as he desired her to forget the young man, she has forgotten him. Her status consciousness can be perceived when showing her preference for Knight she intends to “save herself from a man not fit for her.” (*A Pair of Blue Eyes*, 315)

Elfride appears to be a fickle and a flirt character. She seems to be attracted by the great intellectual powers, superior class and sophisticated manners of the Knight. Like Fancy Day of *Under the Greenwood Tree* she thinks about deserting her ingenuous and youthful lover for a man belonging to superior intellect and, moreover, the upper strata of society; and she actually does the so. She is an impulsive girl of nervous temperament. She has to pay heavily for her flirtatiousness and capricious behaviour. Knight, whom she loves after deserting Stephen Smith, is too refined and fastidious representing his superior class and status in society. Hardy seems to portray the Knight as the representative of the superior upper class society, which finds it difficult in adjusting to normal personal relationships and cope with the practical ways of the common class people. As we come to know, Knight has reached the age of thirty two but he has not kissed any woman other than his mother. This kind of detachment and his lack of emotional experience exhibit the fact that he is a man of repressed sexuality, which fills him with a sense of belonging to a superior class with elevated mental status. The lack of experience with women and his obsession with feminine purity and quest for perfection lead him to a life of emotional upheaval. It is his sole desire to be the first lover of a woman. In the words of Richard H. Taylor, “...he shares with Miss Aldclyffe (of *Desperate Remedies*) years of repressed sexuality, unreasoning possessiveness and jealousy, and a neurotic preoccupation with the sanctity of the kiss.” (Richard H. Taylor, 51) It can be assumed that, “Perhaps Knight was not shaped by Nature for a marrying man. Perhaps his lifelong constraint towards women, which he had attributed to accident, was not chance after all, but the natural result of instinctive acts so minute as to be undiscernible even by himself.” (*A Pair of Blue Eyes*, 384-85) Through the character of Knight Hardy tries to represent the culturally superior and intellectually elevated class revealing the effect of mastering the sexual instinct and deflecting it to higher cultural aims.

Knight’s relentless desire for feminine purity and idealization of Elfride, consequently, prove to be the cause of his estrangement from her following his calculation of the grade of their respective

mental status. "It was his belief in the absolute newness of blandishment to Elfride which had constituted her primary charm." (*A Pair of Blue Eyes*, 368) But Elfride's confession that she has had a lover before Knight hurts his fastidious nature. Knight's persistent questioning about her erstwhile lover makes her wish that it would be better if he were of a grosser nature. She tries to convince him that ordinary men are not delicate like him in their tastes and things go better with less fastidious and less refined husband or lover. He is frustrated to hear her confession of having a lover before him; and his dream to be the first lover of a woman is shattered. "He began to think it was as hard to be earliest in a woman's heart as it was to be first in the Pool of Bethesda." (*A Pair of Blue Eyes*, 368) "When she (Elfride) proves to be an imperfect reincarnation, he thinks himself an Adam betrayed, an exile from paradise. He is ruthless in his frenzy over loss because he cannot accept its finality." (Peter J. Casagrande, 95) here, expecting Elfride as an ideal woman, Knight appears to be resembling Angel Clare in Hardy's another novel, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. The thought of Elfride having been kissed by her former lover is unbearable to him. Knight is driven to the verge of cynicism by his disappointment at finding himself the third lover, after Jethway and Stephen, of Elfride. His heart is broken by Elfride's concealing the fact regarding her intimate relationships with her former lovers; and now, he is not ready to believe in her any more. "The man of many ideas, now that his first dream of impossible things was over, vibrated too far in the contrary direction; and her every movement of feature—every tremor—every confused word was taken as so much proof of her unworthiness." (*A Pair of Blue Eyes*, 400) And after Elfride's confirmation of Knight's constant query that she had eloped with her lover and did not return home the same day, which she left on, it is all over between them. "You must forget me', he said, 'We shall not marry Elfride'." (*A Pair of Blue Eyes*, 400) Thus Knight's fastidiousness, his idealization of Elfride, and Elfride's vacillations and her concealments bring about rupture between the beloved and the lover.

In his fictional works Hardy seems to have always been interested in the psychological problems faced by the educated and thoughtful persons, who think themselves to be superior in social and mental status. In his novels Hardy has depicted the difficulties caused by intellectual and emotional imbalance in the personality of the characters; and moreover he depicts the class consciousness of the intellectually superior and elevated characters. *A Pair of Blue Eyes* seems to be Hardy's earliest attempt at portrayal of the problems arising from the conflict between emotion and reason and the conflict between the superior and inferior social classes. The characters of Angel Clare in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure* show that their hypersensitivity and ethical indecision are results of their superior education and refined mental and social status, and their class consciousness. As Rosemary Sumner observes:

In this novel (*A Pair of Blue Eyes*) we have the first tentative examination of "modern" man, his complexities, his inhibitions, his problems in finding a balance between his instinctive drives and his intellect; we also have, more clearly than in his two earlier works, Hardy's critical attitude towards contemporary views on sexual matters, especially on the conception of purity and innocence. (Rosemary Sumner, 121) In his portrayal of the character of Knight, from the very beginning, Hardy seems to be interested in the emotional, psychological and social and class conflicts. Knight's peculiar personality traits can be regarded as responsible for his alienation from Elfride, though her vacillating and impulsive behaviour, too, is responsible. His superior intellectual ideals make him keep himself

aloof from women till maturity; and he has adopted an unreal, and not the practical, concept of the world. Ultimately they part; and consequently, Elfride marries neither Smith nor Knight but Lord Luxellian, another person belonging to the higher social class, which matches the social status Elfride is brought up in.

Thus, we find that Hardy in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* seems to have tried to depict the social, mental, intellectual, spiritual and domestic conflicts, which are, actually, the results of the contemporary, or rather we should say the ever prevailing, class consciousness and social discrimination; and he has tried to portray the adverse affects of all this on the human psyche and sensibility.

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