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Regionalism in the Novels of Thomas Hardy

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Abstract

Thomas Hardy is one of the most famous regional novelists in English literature. His greatest strength as a novelist lies in his unique depiction of Wessex- a fictitious region of England. He popularized the landscape by beautifully depicting the nature and environment of the particular land and the people therein, especially highlighting the conflict between man and nature. The same physical features- hills and dales, rivers, pastures, meadows, woodland, and heaths etc. of this native land appear and reappear so prominently and vividly in Hardy's novels that they are called the Wessex Novels, of which Far from the Madding Crowd, The Return of the Native, The Mayor of Caster bridge, Tess of the D'Urbervilles and Jude the Obscure are the most celebrated ones. These Wessex novels have established Hardy at the height as a regional novelist. This paper attempts to illustrate the elements of regionalism present in Hardy's novels, and thereby to reassess his greatness as a regional novelist.

In literature, regionalism refers to fiction or poetry that focuses on specific features- including characters, dialects, customs, history and topography- of a particular region. In other words a regional novel is a type of novel that is faithful to a particular geographic region and its people, including behavior, customs, speech, and history. According to M.H. Abrams 'a regional novel emphasizes the setting, speech and social structure and customs of a particular locality, not merely as local colour, but as important conditions affecting the temperament of the characters and their ways of thinking, feeling, and interacting'(202). Since the region may be a reaction or reflection of the author's own, there is often nostalgia and sentimentality in the writing. The

regional novel, thus, is the novel depicting physical feature, life, customs, manners, history etc. of some particular region or locality; not necessarily a factual reporting or photographic reproduction, but a highly creative work of art. Phyllis Bentley highlights that 'the regional novel concentrates on a particular region of a nation being conscious of its characteristics which are unique to that region and differentiate it from other common motherland' (1). However, the selected region becomes a symbol of the world at large, a microcosm which reflects the great world beyond. The greatness of the regional novelist lies in the fact that he surmounts the bounds of his chosen region, and makes it universal in its appeal. That explains the continuing and world-wide popularity of regional novels.



Thomas Hardy is the most important of the regional novelists of England, and deserves more space and attention. His greatness as a regional novelist lies in his depiction of Wessex, the most elaborate study of landscape in the English literature. He has stressed in highlighting the conflict between man and nature, reconstructing the aspects of regionalism in English novel, depicting the nature and environment of the particular region, Wessex, and the people therein. His Wessex stretches from the English Channel in the South, to Cornwall in the West, and Oxford to the North. It is this limited region which forms the scenic background to each of his Wessex Novels. The same physical features- hills and dales, rivers, pastures, meadows, woodland, and heaths- appear and reappear in all his works. In the words of Lionel Johnson 'Wessex, one part of a small island, is his ground; and of Wessex, he takes one part in especial, the country of Dorset: he has rarely left it throughout fifteen books' (86).

The major undertaking of Hardy was the firm establishment of his imaginative world of Wessex- geography, landscape, folk ways, agricultural pursuits, quaint peasantry- as a background of the drama of his main characters. Beginning with the slender idyll of *Under the Greenwood Tree*, he proceeded to the full-length pastoral of the sheep-country, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, and reached the height of his power in *The Return of the Native* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. And his remarkable achievement had been in the settings and ways of life that had impressed his childish imagination, at his father's cottage in a picturesque hamlet in Dorset. The somber beauty of the country

and the quaintness of peasant ways and thought penetrated his spirit and become the very ground and substance of his imagination.

As a novelist, Hardy confines himself to one district of England, which he calls Wessex (the land of West Saxons). In fact, he gave this name to the district in which he was born and with which he was most intimately associated. He resurrected the old name of the locality, Wessex, which comprises Dorset, Wiltshire, Hampshire, parts of Berkshire and Somerset. There are certain natural and other features of the country within this boundary, which distinguish it from the northern and eastern district. The land abounds, with relics from the past- the ancient Roman roads, walls, ruined amphitheatres, fortifications, burial vaults, mounds, the Stonehenge and altars of the ancient Britons. The surface of the earth is varied and undulating, valleys alternating with uplands, heath with deep woods, barns with luxuriant vegetation. The soil is chalky and white, and the principal occupation is agriculture.

It is rarely seen that a man of genius ties himself to his native place as closely as Hardy has done. What he has lost in variety of scenery, he has gained in accuracy of observation and sureness of touch. He was extremely successful in his observation of surrounding and reproducing it with his absolute imagination. Grim ditch observes that 'Hardy's power not only absorbs minute details and changes in the world around him, but links them up with human personality with consummate skill. His ears are open to every slight sound, he sees (and makes us see) every delicate shade of colour, and he constantly creates the illusion in the reader's mind that he is in



the actual spot described' (41).

Hardy has the power of presenting beneath the familiar surface, and shows that in spite of his restricted field of observation human nature is not wanting in richness and variety. He presented the towns, villages, rivers, hills and valleys of his chosen region in a thinly veiled nomenclature, which any native of the place can identify with exactness. Thus, his Caster bridge is Dorchester, his Budmouth is Weymouth, his King's Bere is Regis, his Wintoncester is Winchester, and so forth. Within this area every road is known to Hardy, every legend, every relic of antiquity, together with hosts of family histories and traditions. This is why Hardy's novels are also known as Wessex novels. His range is limited within the four walls of his region, Wessex. In all his novels, the scenes and characters are taken from this region. Brought up in a peasant community, Hardy is superbly successful in drawing the portraits of the natives of Wessex with all their tests, habits, likes and dislikes, joys and miseries. Every event of his novel, therefore, takes place in this region. In fact Hardy's soul and spirit got mingled with the soul and spirit of Wessex people. It is noted that Hardy's art is mainly built as a result of his deep and sympathetic understanding of the short and simple annals of the poor Wessex people-farmer-labourers, hay-trousers, dairy-maids and shepherds and shepherdesses.

As a regional novelist, the greatest strength of Hardy is his presentation of people and their customs dwelling in the region he selected. These people living in Wessex are soaked in tradition, the tradition of a primitive class rooted in the soil, which is their function to typify. One may in them find the spiritual history of

countryside: Feudalism, Catholicism and Protestantism, law and education and tradition, changes in agriculture and commerce and tenure, in traffic and society and living, all these have worked a wrought upon these people. They are as eternal as the wood and field and heaths.

It is observed that these folk display their thoughts and humours most racially and richly, when their talk turns more upon the common emotions, birth and death, and two or three intermediate affairs of the moment. Their talk is shrewd, rude of an earthly and material savour. Hardy makes them talk in such a language as with a smatting of Wessex dialect. He makes his rustics speak in Wessex dialect because he thinks Wessex dialect is the passport to our intimacy with the Wessex folk. However, he makes but a spring use of the local words of Wessex dialect because he properly understands that too much of these words or an exact phonograph of Wessex dialect will spoil his works. So he contrives to reconcile the demands of truth with those of art in a way which brings Wessex before our eyes and the echo of its speech resounds in our ears.

The Wessex folk are far from the madding crowd; away from the confused commerce of towns, and tumult and turmoil of modernization, in which nature plays a direct part with what influence upon soul and body. For crowds and multitudinous traffic, these men have innumerable society of natural things, trees and winds and waters; they find companionship in creatures of woodland and the fields; their hopes, fears, experiences, sciences, their faith and love, sorrow and hate, are nourished by the Mighty Mother Earth.

These Wessex folk, fast rooted in the



soil, have mental immobility i.e., orthodoxy. Their religion is represented as 'fetishistic': a primitive superstition about places and things, persons and practices, of a pagan original, and only disguised under a Christian nomenclature. They entertain many superstitions. They are impregnated with legendary lore. They lead a calm and quiet life, in the lap of nature and are deeply affected by it.

Hardy has a great love to depict men and women of strength and stability of character, of somewhat pagan severity, grand in suffering, simple and resolute. His mastery in the art of characterization is seldom questioned. He is most successful and obviously writers with most enjoyment when deals with the characters and the place with which he is most familiar and which he studied most accurately. But his success as one of the greatest regional novelist lies on his portrayal of immortal characters drawn from the common and lower class men and women who are deeply rooted and affected by the locality they live in. in this regard Goodman rightly remarked- 'He is not much interested in middle-class respectability, and not at ease with aristocracy. But his peasants are integral parts of the landscape in which they live and move: the characters and the scenery form one organic whole, and they are inseparable without infinite damage to both'(427). The portrayal of the rustic characters, which forms one of the basic requirement of regional novel, with due importance to draw the conflict and the desired tragedy into the story is a great strength of Hardy.

The peasants of Thomas Hardy do not form a class apart from the characters in the Wessex novels, for almost by

imperceptible gradation, the background or chorus of yokels is connected with the principal characters that are higher in social scale. Hardy has protested more than once against the city man's view of undifferentiated 'Hodge'. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* Hardy remarks that 'these rustic are beings of many minds, being infinite in difference; some happy, many serene, a few depressed, one here or there bright even to genius, some stupid, others wanton, others austere'(480). As observed by Samuel Chew in his *Thomas Hardy: Poet and Novelist*, "The importance of these people varies with the social strata in which the several stories are set. In *Under the Greenwood Tree* we are in the midst of them; in *The Woodlanders*, they play a great part; in *Far From the Madding Crowd* and still more in *The Mayor of Caster bridge* they serve rather as part of the background and as a sort of chorus that observes and comments upon events"(121).

The peasants and rustics are part of the landscape. They are thoroughly at ease in their world. They lead speculative lives close to nature, never rebelling against circumstances. If they complain at all – and it is only the feeble among them that do so – it is usually of small physical ills of little moment. Hardy shows no concern for their social condition. Often he seems to be out of sympathy with the advance of so-called education, believing that National Schools obliterate more of value than they give. He lays no stress on their poverty; in fact he declares that their misery has been much over-estimated. It is the rustic in the Wessex Novels who are happy, for the secret of happiness as is said in the *Woodlanders* lies in limiting the aspirations. They are quietists without



being aware of the fact. Importantly they are necessarily unintelligent. Many are shrewd, some witty, nearly all unconsciously humorous.

Nature obviously dominates the theme and scenes of a regional novel; and it is undoubtedly agreed that Hardy was very successful in this regard. His novels are rich in description and scene-painting from nature. Hardy too is fond of presenting a broad sketch of mountain, lake and sunset sky etc. Nature is ever present in his story. Nature plays a large part in Hardy's novels than in those of any other English novelists. It is not just the background in his drama, but a leading character in it. Sometimes it exercises an active influence on the course of the event, more often it is a spiritual agent, colouring the mood and shaping the disposition of human beings.

Hardy's love for nature and the earth is an intensely personal and local one. He shows a profound feeling for the heaths and the pastures of Wessex. However he never carries out a romantic temperament in projecting nature. He is more a bit realist in this aspect, as Duffin observes 'Hardy nowhere express the extreme inference that every flower enjoys the air it breaths' (56). Hardy emphasizes on the gloomy part of the Nature. For him Nature is the agent of cruelty and destruction. She has no sympathy for human being. For him all the resourcefulness, beauty, charm, bewitching power of nature is for the destruction of man. Hardy thinks that nature is insensible to the feelings of man, and finds a sort of fiendish delight in slaying simple human being. Edgong Heath is the terrible spot where many lives are crushed.

It is very obvious that it has been the nature, the immortal Wessex, its

environment and the characters therein that has formed the background of Thomas Hardy's novel giving it the Regional note. His love for nature and its relation or rather domination upon helpless human is the chief subject matter of his novels. Here to draw conclusion the lines of David Daiches can be repeated-

"Setting his character in that southern corner of England he named Wessex, a large agricultural region steeped in History and slow to emerge from the older rhythm of rural life and labor into the modern industrial world, he saw them as elemental figures whose passions were doomed to run the course that the human condition set for them, figures who, contemplated against a background of immemorial and indifferent nature, of the recurring procession of the seasons, and suggestive and mysterious relics of the human past- Roman remains, Stonehenge or less tangible relics such as lingering folks customs and superstitions- acted out their general tragic dramas with a dignity imposed on them by the simple fact of their having to endure the human lot."(1073)

Hardy's greatness as a regional novelist is beyond any question or doubt. He has acquired a thorough knowledge of his region. He has described the features of his Wessex, its man and manners, nature and topographic scenery with great accuracy and realism. Hardy has revealed the beauty and charm of Wessex to the reader's eye and immortalized it. It must not be supposed that he inhabited a region with which none could compare in beauty, or that such spots exist nowhere else. What is



true is that all these landscapes of meadow and wood, all these pictures of villages and rustic scenes are indebted for their existence and immortalization to Hardy. This wonderful observer discovered things which did not exist for the ordinary eye. It is enough to travel in Wessex to be

convinced that many a land become a realm changed with poetry and beauty, if only it finds the hand which will illuminate. Hardy is great in virtue of his penetrating and flexible interpretation of his native earth.

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