

**Far from the Madding Crowd:
Bathsheba's Tale of Resistance to Appropriation**
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Abstract

Bathsheba in Far from the Madding Crowd is one of Thomas Hardy's most interesting female characters. What gives her a strong edge over the rest is Bathsheba's necessary stand against being reduced to being merely 'womanly'. Pursued by three suitors, Bathsheba asserts her womanhood by redefining herself. She refuses to comply with the wishes of patriarchal culture. As a consequence, the representatives of patriarchy make her see the inadequacy ingrained in her as a woman. She is judged by the standards of the Victorian ideals of womanhood and categorized accordingly. Her longing to escape appropriation and classification becomes pronounced in her actions when she is not given integration as a 'woman' with her own aspirations to rise above her lot. This paper attempts to highlight her resistance and rebellion against the set standards and conventions of the society. It explores her deep rooted revulsion for the institution of marriage which, according to her, suffocates two individuals by defining a limited space to realize themselves; hence curbing the possibility of healthy growth.

Keywords: Thomas Hardy, Patriarchy, Marriage, Bathsheba, Troy; Gabriel Oak.

Introduction

Far from the Madding Crowd records the journey of a woman through life who is left alone by circumstances to fight her battles. Bathsheba – a headstrong and unconventional woman – incurs public censure due to her weird opinions. She transgresses the boundaries set by the patriarchal culture. Her resistance to be absorbed in the identity of patriarchs testifies to her autonomous and independent way of thinking. It is the sin of personal existence and this woman needs to be taught how a model woman ought to behave. She is made to understand what is expected of her in a culture in which a woman's sphere is already defined and her roles prescribed by the society. Management of farms, business dealing and toying with men's emotions when she is no 'schemer of marriage'

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will only engender resentment among men and will never incur approval by patriarchy. She humiliates Gabriel Oak by dismissing him from service; she drives Boldwood insane by a childish freak played upon him on the pretext of responding to his devotion. Bathsheba justifies her reckless behaviour towards Boldwood:

*"I was bound to show some feeling, if I would not be a graceless shrew. Yet each of those pleasures was just for the day – the day just for the pleasure. How would I to know that what is a pastime to all other men was death to you?"*¹

Bathsheba's marriage with Troy turns out to be disastrous due to her incapacity to be defined in cultural or relational terms.

The society marginalizes Bathsheba on the basis of her anatomy or gender which breeds contempt and resentment in her. Bathsheba has the ability to astonish those who push her to the peripheral position on the basis of her gender by assuming her to be deficient in managerial skills. Despite her talents, Oak expresses his concern regarding her management of farms after he quits: *"How would the farm go on with nobody to mind it but a woman"*.² While inspecting corn on the palm of her hand *"she somewhat defiantly turned up her face to argue a point with a tall man, suggested that there was potentiality enough in that lithe slip of humanity for alarming exploits of sex, and daring enough to carry them out"*.³ In corn market she strictly adheres to her own prices. As to the management of farms, her resolution is commendable when she tells her workers that they should not delude themselves into thinking that being a woman she will not know the unfair ones among them if there are any, implying that she can distinguish between the good and the bad. *"I shall be up before you are awake; I shall be afield before you are up; and I shall have breakfasted before you are afield"*.⁴ How can such a woman let go of her autonomy and identity?

Bondage or captivity is met with strong resistance by Bathsheba who holds a grudge against God for making her a weaker sex. Her views on love, marriage and husband come as no surprise to the reader who is familiar with Hardy's conception of exceptional, arrogant, desirable, self-willed and strong women seeking self-realization. Bathsheba's first encounter with Sergeant Troy reveals her aversion for the other sex when her dress is tugged. In his effort to disentangle it, Troy makes it clear that *'you are a prisoner, miss; it is no use blinking the matter'*.⁵ The word 'prisoner' implies captivity and is more than sufficient to put her on guard against this representative of patriarchy; hence Bathsheba gets alarmed. Troy wonders and is at a loss to comprehend the reason that may account for such a fair and dutiful girl's "aversion to her father's

sex”.⁶ Troy's appearance on the scene posits a threat to her existence, individuality, freedom and independence, and she suffers dire consequences. Troy's devious ways wins her over and the realization comes when her property is already squandered by Troy. She is betrayed by Troy and expresses her discomfort over her lot in utter helplessness and despair “Loving is misery for women always. I shall never forgive God for making me a woman...”.⁷ Like Hardy's headstrong women, she refuses to believe in love. That this woman is at war against society is obvious from her setting off for Bath to track down Troy when, according to country folk, “the ladies don't drive at these hours, miss, as a jeneral rule of society”.⁸ On being reprimanded by Boldwood for claiming to be in love with him and denying it later, Bathsheba admits:

*“You over-rate my capacity for love. I don't possess half the warmth of nature you believe me to have. An unprotected childhood in a cold world has beaten gentleness out of me”*⁹

The will not to be bound, subjugated or suffocated in the limited space defined by matrimony or wedding ring gives significance to Bathsheba's actions throughout the novel.

*“Oak's activity of espial unobtrusively links with denial, with the prohibition placed upon Bathsheba's growth to self-knowledge, which, as prefigured in the proposal scene, ultimately leads to the total enclosure of her space that Oak's wedding ring signifies”*¹⁰

The idea of being possessed by a man, in any sense, is disgusting to her.

Independent, strong-willed and free-spirited Bathsheba is not an easy woman to conquer and rule over, particularly when life has taught her to assert herself. She is difficult to conquer, and, if conquered, she will never own it unless beaten by circumstances. She finds a certain degree of stooping in committing herself to the charge of a man and “renouncing the simplicity of a maiden existence to become the humbler half of an indifferent matrimonial whole”.¹¹ When Farmer Oak discloses his love for her, she gives vent to her feelings regarding marriage by saying:

*“Well, what I mean is that I shouldn't mind being a bride at a wedding, if I could be one without having a husband. But since a woman can't show off in that way by herself, I shan't marry—at least yet”*¹²

Dominance or authoritative attitude shows itself in Bathsheba's arrogant speech and actions. Bathsheba is wooed by Gabriel Oak whose proposal she turns down. Bathsheba tells Liddy (her confidante) that Oak is not good enough for her: “It wouldn't do, Mr. Oak. I want somebody to tame me; I am too independent and you would never be able to, I know”.¹³ Her refusal has the ring of Eustacian passion. Wildeve doesn't suffice for

Eustacia and Oak will not do for Bathsheba, then who will suffice for her desire? Bathsheba is a woman who sees a kind of condescension in surrendering to a lover's kiss or his embrace. Liddy's remarks on Bathsheba's arrogance are enlightening "How sweet to be able to disdain, when most of us are glad to say,

"Thank you!' I seem I hear it. No, sir—I'm your better, or Kiss my foot, sir; my face is for mouths of consequence".¹⁴ That she is a woman of strong will is acknowledged by Troy himself. Troy's apprehension is obvious in his remark: "But she has a will—not to say a temper, and I shall be a mere slave to her. I could do anything with poor Fanny Robin".¹⁵

The power struggle between Troy and Bathsheba to establish their identities surfaces and becomes pronounced in the choices they make. Transitory passion for Troy blurs Bathsheba's vision and judgment, and she falls an easy prey to snares laid by him. Troy's intention in keeping woman as his slave is obvious from his choice of Fanny Robin whom he can subjugate. To subdue or break Bathsheba's will is a tough task for him and it jeopardizes his masculinity to assert which he overdoes his role. Victor Hugo's quotation, perhaps pertinent in this context, is copied in Hardy's 1867 Notebook which reads:

"It is said that slavery had disappeared from European civilization. This is a mistake...It weighs now only upon woman, and is called prostitution".¹⁶

The inadequacy of language to express a woman's self and her resentment for patriarchy finds its true expression in Bathsheba's shrewd remarks when she refuses Boldwood. Bathsheba could not be persuaded by Boldwood's repeated entreaties after she becomes a widow. She is a shrewd woman who knows the inadequacy of language to deal with a woman's feelings and emotions. She tells him deviously: "It is difficult for a woman to define her feelings in language which is chiefly made by men to express theirs".¹⁷ Boldwood's later mental derangement is a proof of Bathsheba's discretion in refusing him. It is only after Troy's betrayal that Bathsheba recognizes herself standing in contrast to Fanny Robin. After being disappointed with Troy, Bathsheba does see the folly of marrying him. She feels a sense of loneliness and despair after her disastrous marriage, particularly after Fanny Robin's death.

Dominance and subjugation is a central concern which gives significance to Bathsheba's thoughts and actions. Realization of her defeat comes to Bathsheba but with its own price. It is Fanny Robin's death which brings a realization of her own inadequacies as a female. Lying dead in her coffin with her baby, Fanny Robin appears victorious

to Bathsheba. Bathsheba feels herself to be defeated by her rival who, by dying, transcends the confinement of body and relishes fulfillment. Fanny Robin wins Troy's loyalty and turns out to be the usurper of Bathsheba's status. Bathsheba wants to equate her status with Fanny Robin:

*"The one feat alone – that of dying – by which a mean condition could be resolved into a grand one, Fanny had achieved....which had, in Bathsheba's wild imagining, turned her companion's failure to success, her humiliation to triumph, her lucklessness to ascendancy; it had thrown over herself a garish light of mockery, and set upon all things about her an ironical smile."*¹⁸

Despite being bothered consistently by the pursuit of her three contending suitors, Bathsheba never experiences failing of any sort in her capacities – as a woman farmer, a farm manager and a sheepshearer. It is only in one role – that of a wife – where she is lacking terribly. In other words, her capacity as a woman is doubtful. Men cannot find comfort in her femininity and she gets the evidence of it in her husband's relationship with Fanny Robin whose womanhood is asserted in the birth of a child. Bathsheba desperately wishes to escape from herself but whither? In Troy's callous estimate, Fanny Robin is his real wife and much more to him than his own wretched wife. The question of her identity becomes pronounced in her words "if she's – that, – what – I am?" Linda M. Shires analyzes Fanny Robin's death scene in detail and interprets Bathsheba's death wish as her desire to find "*peace from gender struggle and specifically what she perceives as male domination*".¹⁹ Bathsheba screams in agony at the discovery of Fanny's victory. She is misjudged and stereo-typed by the representative of patriarchy who happens to be her owner:

*"The scene of the corpse, through Troy's intervention, becomes one of misrecognition of femininity. If she's – that, – what – am I? cries Bathsheba with despair and indignation'. Not seeing her femaleness in his view of her femaleness, she does not know who she is. Yet she will find out."*²⁰

Shires is justified in considering the place, where Bathsheba takes refuge from patriarchal appropriation, more like a womb; her escape to that place and falling asleep reinforces her wish to be in a world devoid of gender discrimination. Having thought of nothing better to do with her palpitating self for the night, the self-divided Bathsheba wakes up, voiceless but refreshed. With the morning light, the fern brake is misty and blurred, as if gender itself were mixed in 'hazy luminousness'. The landscape is inscribed with sexual signs both masculine, such as spiky ferns and tall fungi, and feminine, such as the dawn and the pool. But

this womblike haven where she could commune with herself alone is invaded not only by the sounds of birds, but also by the voice of ploughman and a team of her horses. This masculine intrusion reasserts itself and determines her position in a gendered world.²¹

Troy does not judge Bathsheba justifiably and fairly; he becomes the mirror and distorts her identity by creating an illusion of her real self. Instead of taking pride in her abilities, here is a man reminding her of her inadequacies. Instead of loving her for what and who she is, he is judging her for what she is not. He is not appreciating her for what she is; he is condemning her for what she is not. He can never see Bathsheba the way she sees herself – as an independent woman who has her own ways. “misrecognition of femininity”²² on the part of Troy, is the same misjudgment that kills Tess and Eustacia. Troy represents the society like Angel; he treats Bathsheba crudely and seeks to negate her identity by asserting his own manliness. Here, for the first time, Bathsheba hears her own voice as “quite that of another woman now”²³ and she is made to take a course which, in all her senses, she would never have taken. Her resolve to escape from her conventional husband to become a runaway wife is typical of a proud woman of her caliber. She confronts her real self in this scene: the self which instigates her to take refuge in a space which is a neutral zone – a place free from gender dichotomy. Her desperation is at the peak when she says “*Liddy if ever you marry – God forbid that you ever should! You will find yourself in a fearful situation.*”²⁴

Conclusion

Troy, Boldwood and Oak define their masculinity by redefining Bathsheba according to their wishes; hence making her see the prescriptive roles of a woman. This definition is founded on the preconceived notions of an ideal womanhood. They paste the stereotypical image onto her, falling short of which disqualifies her for being a desirable woman. After redefinition, Bathsheba is no longer the Bathsheba of the earlier chapters. Betrayal of Troy robs her of happiness, peace of mind and pride. A representative of patriarchy questions her womanhood. Her marriage becomes a power struggle between Troy and herself – a dominance and subjugation which exhausts her. Had it not been for her uncle's confidence which he reposed in her abilities as a caretaker of his property, she would have ended up her life rather than live in a perpetual misery of being reduced to a stereotypical woman.

Notes & References

- ¹ Thomas Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, (London: Macmillan & Co Ltd, 1963), 228
- ² Ibid., 217
- ³ Ibid., 105
- ⁴ Ibid., 97
- ⁵ Ibid., 183
- ⁶ Ibid., 184
- ⁷ Ibid., 222
- ⁸ Ibid., 240
- ⁹ Ibid., 229
- ¹⁰ Rosemarie Morgan, *Women and Sexuality in the Novels of Thomas Hardy*, (London: Routledge, 1988), 53
- ¹¹ Thomas Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, loc.cit., 306
- ¹² Ibid., 40
- ¹³ Ibid., 41
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 89
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 260
- ¹⁶ Shanta Dutta, *Ambivalence in Hardy: A Study of His Attitude to Women*, (London: Anthem Press, 2010), 203
- ¹⁷ Thomas Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, loc.cit., 390
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 330-31)
- ¹⁹ Linda M. Shires, "Narrative, Gender and Power in Far From the Madding Crowd" in *The Sense of Sex: Feminist Perspectives on Hardy*, Ed. Margaret R. Higgonet. (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 49
- ²⁰ Ibid., 60
- ²¹ Ibid., 60-61
- ²² Ibid., 60
- ²³ Thomas Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, loc.cit., 334
- ²⁴ Ibid., 341