

Dirge of the Fallen Woman in European Literature: When Religion Turns Sour and Evil to Make the Innocent Female Soul Suppressed

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Abstract

This paper examines the portrayal of the fallen woman depicted in French and English literature with close reference to Denis Diderot's *The Nun* (La Religieuse-1760-96) and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891). Denis Diderot's *The Nun* is an excellent historical novel which endeavors to show the functioning of the European families during an era when the Catholic Church and Christian faith had ample power over the rhythm of life, family inheritances and marriage. It paints with great vivacity the cry of a young girl who had to enter into the cruel, inhuman world of religion against her will but with abnegation. Similarly, Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* depicts the downtrodden rights of the women in Victorian era and their distress occurred due to the society, family and the Catholic Church. Tess who is as the same age as of Suzanne in *The Nun* goes through a similar pain and distress and both of them break down under the weight of tough conditions in life. The church which is expected to be the cure, stands as a whammy in these young girls' lives. The aim of this paper is to analyse the way the distrust of Roman Catholicism was depicted in 18th century French novel and in its 19th century English counterpart. What more, this study focuses on the influence of 18th century French literature over the 19th century English literature and how Denis Diderot's portrayal of Catholic Church is reflected in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

Key words: Church, English Literature, French Literature, Religion, Women

Introduction

Denis Diderot's *The Nun* and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* are considered the finest novels in European literature which clearly depict the social and religious injustice appeared in the 18th and 19th centuries. It was an era when women were suppressed by their family, society and religion. Being the weaker sex, at times, they had to obey the sexual and social differences and their fate was decided either by their family, society or by the religious institutions. In his novel, Denis Diderot reveals a universe little known to the general public, today as yesterday, which deserves a close look because there are hidden unsuspected human sufferings. Similarly, Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* reveals the plight of a young girl who was always oppressed by the poverty of her family, who never got the opportunity to educate herself and who was a victim of sexual violation and religion. This study analyses how Diderot and Hardy brought out social and religious "realism" to the world through their novels.

This research work contains a comparison between two major literary work of French and English Literature. The French novel *The Nun* and the English novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* belong to two different centuries. The question is how both these novels portray their main protagonists and depict the theme of religious injustice on fallen women. The intention is to seek whether these two novels contain any similarity or the former has influences on the latter.

In this discussion of the "Fallen Woman" and the religion's influence on them, Subbamma's famous book-

let *Women: Tradition and Culture* is taken into account as it denotes the position of women in the society: "The woman has been relegated to the second place, oppressed by society and religion and dominated by man" [Subbamma, 1985]. The 18th century French society and Victorian society contained different social layers and women of each social layer had different positions. Shiman (1992) and Harvey (2003) describe that women of each social position had their own duties and responsibilities with some limited rights. Amelia Mason in *The women of the French Salons* [Mason, 1891] reveals how independent, educated and stubborn daughters of high and bourgeois French families were sent to convents for refuge and Diderot further adds that the illegitimate daughters were also sent to convents as refugees. Elizabeth Whitelegg in her oeuvre, "*The Changing Experience of Women*" further elaborates that women of lower class who had no means of support for living, had to go outside, earn their living and for then face social violence [Whitelegg, 1989]. Alexander Walker brings out the concept of "Natural Law" and he holds the idea that the reason behind this pathetic situation of women is that they are "little capable of reasoning, feeble and timid" and as a result, they "require protection" [Walker, 1840]. Both Diderot and Hardy make strong criticisms on church and religion and they marvelously portrayed their innocent and charming heroines. Goulbourne in his introduction to Denis Diderot's "*The Nun*" states that "Diderot was no stranger in satirizing the convents. He compares convents to prisons. He compares this witty defamiliarization by comparing nuns to birds and convents to aviaries" [Goulbourne, 2005]. In the credit of Hardy, Miles says: "A woman in Hardy's

hands could be made to bear a weight of suffering whose inflictions transcend the personal and move through human to sublime; he never found the same true of a male character" [Miles, 1979]. Both Diderot and Hardy question the existence of religious institutions in the society as they offer nothing more than pain to womanhood.

Methods

The methodology used in this research is the qualitative method where the analysis is given the priority. This study seeks the similarities and the differences between two major literary works of the European literature. Therefore, "*The Nun*" by Denis Diderot and "*Tess of the D'Urbervilles*" by Thomas Hardy are used as the primary sources and as secondary sources, the criticisms and the commentaries of the critics, reviews and journal articles are referred. The major intention of this study is to provide an analysis on how the 18th century French novel and 19th century English novel together portrayed a social canker in that era and the influence of 18th century French literature over 19th century English literature. Therefore, the aforementioned two books have been thoroughly studied and the extracts which depict the agony of main two protagonists due to religious and social injustice have been selected for the analysis. These extracts reveal the point of view of the authors and how they reacted to the social issues of the eras they represent. The phenomenological approach is followed when analysing the data and the extracts of "*The Nun*" by Denis Diderot and "*Tess of the D'Urbervilles*" by Thomas Hardy are analysed and compared along with the comments and literary criticisms of critics. In order to comprehend the societal position women had in the two eras, the role of women in 18th century French society and 19th century Victorian society is analysed. The major objective of the research has been achieved through the analysis of the dirge of "Fallen Women" in "*The Nun*" and "*The Tess of the D'Urbervilles*"; religion turns sour and evil to make the innocent female soul suppressed.

Results and Discussion

Women in 18th century French society and 19th century Victorian society

18th century French society and 19th century Victorian society had many similarities as well as many differences in many aspects. Both these periods are conspicuous in European history as they hold out the biggest historical transition ever. The period of 18th century marks an ample change in French society as well as in economy. A powerful wealthy class was born in France and this class started challenging the cultural and social monopoly of the aristocracy. The aristocratic and religious imperliasm was largely threatened due to the expansion of new trades with French colonies and the French revolution which took place in 1789. The church hierarchy was facing a continuous battle as the Catholic

Church was weakened by the high and low clergy conflicts and State and Jesuits conflicts.

The women were still considered the weaker sex and the society, religion and men had power over their lives. This sexual discrimination was not only apparent in European countries like England and France, but it was a pestering canker all over the world anon. For instance, women were acutely detested by most of the clergy in Mexico and they had least rights in the society. Mexican anthropologist, Fernando Benitez, remarks in his book, *Demons in the Convent*, that the Archbishop of Mexico, Francisco de Aguiar y Seijas (1680-1698) disgusted women extremely that they were not even allowed at the church or the convent at his presence [Benitez, 1998].

The French convents in 18th century were also similarly administered and most of the French women were banned into convents for variety of reasons. The noble and bourgeois families were never willing to provide a dowry for their illegitimate daughters as well as the daughters who could not marry off due to their too independent and defiant characters. Therefore, they were sent to convents as it would result positively in the matrimony of their other children. It is indeed an injustice but that was the maximum justice the parents could do for akin daughters. And the convents which are called "les couvents" in French were ready to provide welcome refuge to women who were not fortunate to experience the real essence of their youth. In the acclaimed monograph, *The women of the French Salons* (1891) Amelia Mason finely elaborates the plight of the 18th century women and their exploited rights. She remarks that the women who could not gain the matrimonial comfort ended up accommodating themselves at the convents: "The fashion of the period furnished a peaceful and dignified refuge for women, when their beauty waned and the "terrible forties" ended their illusions. To go into brief retreat for penitence and prayer was at all times a graceful thing to do, besides making for safety. It was only a step further to retire altogether from the scenes of pleasure which had begun to pall. The convent offered a haven of repose to the bruised heart, a fresh aim for drooping energies, a needed outlet for devouring emotions, and a comfortable sense of security, not only for this world, but for the next" [Mason, 1891].

Furthermore, the poor, lower class French women had no alternative except working hard to gain their living. Their lamentations were not apprehended by the religious and the governing hegemony of the society. The social violence had mounted to the peak that the people were awfully suppressed and in line of fire.

It is this history which grounded the novel "*La Religieuse*" - "*The Nun*" by Denis Diderot in 18th century. He harshly criticised and satirized the inhuman behavior of the Catholic Church and convents which were unable to provide any consolation to wounded human souls. These enlightened thoughts of universal equal rights for individuals, women and children were a powerful cause

behind the French revolution (1789) and a large number of deprived women who suffocated due to social injustice also took part in the revolutionary crowds.

The 19th century Victorian society was not much different from the 18th century French society though 19th century was the principle transitional period of England. The irony is that the period of 19th century was named in British Monarch Queen Victoria's name but the women in Victorian era were not at least given their major rights and privileges. Victorian women had immense financial and sexual disadvantages. They were never considered equal with men and men had power over women and home. The reason for this inequality is that there were many religious restrictions on women and it was believed that men's right to have power is "divinely ordered". As Robert Filmer (1680) argued, "monarchy was a natural institution, to be traced back to the Biblical account of Eden, to the sovereignty over his family given to Adam" [Schochet, 1988]. According to this claim, men were considered to possess complete authority over women in the family. While some thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant justified this "natural law", the writers like Denis Diderot and Thomas Hardy strongly rejected the gender inequality and "the intention of nature". The term "intention of nature" was used in that era to mean that the women are physically weaker than men and this weakness leads to women's eternal inferiority in the society. And the cause behind this severe sexual discrimination in the society was none other than the religious institutions themselves. The parody of this situation is "do people need a religion to create discrimination or to eradicate discrimination from the society?" Abominably, the majority of the social problems in the aforementioned European societies were created by the church and the affiliated religious institutions.

What more, the situation of women in the Victorian society differed according to their social class and status. The aristocratic women had more independence, freedom and power in the society than the middle class and lower class women. The upper-class women lived as "members of a collective household with many familial supports" [Shiman, 1992]. Marriage was the principle aim of the lives of aristocratic families and it was an alliance of powers for them. The Victorian middle class women were not allowed to work, as Harvey comments: "The Victorian middle class image of women were culturally controlled. They were denied political and economic power, and were expected to conform to the idea of separate spheres for men and women" [Harvey, 2003]. Lower class working women owned a pathetic life because of their lower standards of living and shortage of money. The members of the working class families were dependent on each other. Working class women were occupied in factories, mines, domestic service, garment industry and many other labour work to make a living. Likewise, they were constantly misused and sexually exploited by men. Thomas Hardy's heroine Tess

in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* along with her poor familial condition is the most appropriate elaboration on the suffocation of the working class in the Victorian society. The poor working class women had no means of support to gain their living except making use of themselves. They had no right on education, power and higher social condition. Elizabeth Whitelegg in her oeuvre, "*The Changing Experience of Women*" (1989) also depicts that "the poor, the illiterate, the economically and politically powerless of the past operated according to values which fully justified the employment of women outside home" [Whitelegg, 1989].

The life conditions of both 18th century French women and 19th century Victorian women had so much in common and they all went through the same agony. There was no authority to speak in favor of them and women were an isolated ensemble in both societies. 19th century Victorian society was confronted by many changes due to the industrial revolution and it is a fact that the French revolution which took place in 18th century had ample influences on the industrializing Victorian society.

The "Fallen Women" in "*The Nun*" and "*The Tess of the D'Urbervilles*"

"Women", who were perpetually labelled the "Weaker Sex" in 18th century French society and 19th century English society, were compelled to bear excessive pain, negligence and suffocation offered by the so called "divine" society composed by religion and men. Women's lives were most likely to get ruined if something unrighteous happened as all the social norms and laws were formed against them. All the more, "natural law" was against women and they had to surrender men under their physical power. A renowned Scottish physiologist and encyclopaedist of the time Alexander Walker (1779-1852) asserts his view regarding the physical differences between men and women, "It is evident that the man, possessing reasoning faculties, muscular power, and courage to employ it, is qualified for being a protector; the woman being little capable of reasoning, feeble and timid, requires protection" [Walker, 1840]. Under these circumstances, women were easily trapped and wrecked under the weight of constraining conditions of life. And these wrecked women are the "fallen women" whose dirge was always muffled and whose lives finally encountered a tragic doom.

In a period when no one came forth to speak in favor of French women, the eminent philosopher and encyclopaedist in 18th century, Denis Diderot disclosed his liberated views regarding the rights of women. Diderot wrote the French novel "*La Religieuse*" (1760) which was later translated into English as "*The Nun*" to unfold a real life experience of another young French woman who is called Marguerite Delamarre. The story of "*The Nun*" flows in the form of "memoirs" of a nun who has got escaped from a cloister. Her recollections re-

veal the darker side of the convent life in 18th century France. The central character of *The Nun* was Suzanne Simonin who was forced to enter the Catholic Convent by her mother because of her illegitimate birth. And the mother did not want Suzanne to share the heritage of her other daughters. Suzanne was obliged to pay off her mother's sins by devoting herself for religious life which she never wished for. Her account of her first vowing reveals that she behaved like an automaton and her heart and the mind were not engaged in the religious act: "They did whatever they wanted with me throughout this morning, which has never been real to me, as I never knew how long it lasted. I have no idea what I did or what I said. I must have asked questions, and I must have replied and made my vows, but I have no memory in doing so" [Goulbourne, 2005]. Just like her other sisters and many other young girls in her acquaintance, she also wished a life full of marital happiness. In contrary to all her wishes and dreams, she gained nothing more than atrocious cruelty and hypocrisy from her destined religious life. The only amiable person she meets in her convent life was the Mother Superior of her very first convent; the Convent Sainte-Marie. When she asks Suzanne what she wants to be in her life, she answers "Everything, except a nun. I don't want to be it and I will not be (...)" [Diderot, 1983]. Her acute dislike towards the religious life makes her run into any extend to gain liberation. Her Mother Superior made several efforts to make her accept what she was offered by the fate: "These words may surprise you: may God preserve you from ever finding out how true they are. Sister Suzanne, the good nun is the one who brings with her into the cloister some great sin to expiate" [Goulbourne, 2005]. Here, the question which strikes the reader is "Is Suzanne truly sinned?" She inherited an illegitimate birth from her mother and the sarcasm is that, instead of the mother, the society punishes Suzanne by snatching away her individual freedom. And it is a universal fact that, if there is someone in this world who could better comprehend the pain of a child, that's his/her mother. As for Suzanne, her mother expects her daughter to comprehend her pain and redeem her sins by sacrificing her whole life for religion: "don't make your dying mother suffer; let her go to her grave in peace so that she may tell herself, as she's about to appear before the judge of all things, that she has atoned for sin as far as she could, so that she can reassure herself that, after she is dead, you won't make trouble for her family and you won't lay claim to rights that aren't yours" [Goulbourne, 2005]. These cruel words of twisted logic make the reader detest Suzanne's mother for her inhumanity.

When Suzanne could not gain any relief from her family nor from her convent, she sued in the law courts to be released from her vows which was also dismissed for some unrelated and irrelevant reasons. Thus, she was imprisoned and treated like an animal when her second sadistic Mother Superior got to know about her intended law suit. In accordance with all these incidents

depicted by Diderot, the reader perceives that "fallen women" like Suzanne were afflicted in every way. In the latter part of the novel, Diderot directs the readers' attention towards another hidden aspect of the society, "same-sex intimacy". Nevertheless, this novel is not an ambiguous attack on lesbianism but it contains a liberal vision of same sex desire. It is noteworthy that the third Mother Superior's sexual climaxes were presented subtly and sympathetically in the novel though at a time Suzanne declares her dislike towards her third Mother Superior's sexual interests: "Oh! Monsieur, you simply cannot begin to imagine how devious these Mothers Superior are!" [Diderot, 1983]. The circumstances were such that Suzanne could never made her mind to spend the rest of her life in the convent. Her prime aim was to acquire freedom.

Similarly, Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* depicts the image of "Fallen Woman" by portraying the main protagonist "Tess". Like Denis Diderot, Thomas Hardy also looks sympathetically at the problems of women in his époque. Hardy's remarkable heroine Tess's character can be compared to that of Denis Diderot. Both Tess and Suzanne are naive young ladies. However, their social classes are different, both of them go through similar agony due to the social and religious injustice. Tess belongs to the lower working class family though in the very beginning of the novel Tess's father boasts of his family name "Durbeyfield" stating that they are descendants of noble Durbeyfield bloodline. Ironically, this misleading information was given to him by the parson of their village church and belatedly, this backbiting leads to the misery of Tess's innocent life.

Much the same Diderot's Suzanne, Hardy's Tess owns a tragic downfall in life because of her mother. After getting to know about the ancestry of their agname "Durbeyfield", she sends Tess to a hazard; to the hands of Alec D'Urberville. Independent, spirited Tess was destroyed by Alec and Tess blames her mother for being delinquent and not educating her of the possible dangers a young girl could encounter in life: "Why didn't you tell me there was danger in menfolk'? Why didn't you warn me? Ladies know what to fend hands against because they read novels that tell them of these tricks: but I never had the chance of learning in that way, and you didn't help me [Hardy, 1994].

Tess gets sexually exploited by Alec and gives birth to an illegitimate son named "Sorrow". Tess was not given permission to baptize her child despite her Christian upbringing. She recognizes the injustice of religion when the village parson told her that she cannot give her child a Christian burial. She had to do her son's funeral rights by herself and even the burial site which was allocated for newborn was in the corner of the graveyard beside the graves of murders, thieves and other bad characters. Subbama in her note on oppressed women clarifies that: "Religion has condemned women to slavery from

birth onwards. Society has restricted the development of her personality. Man has suppressed her talents. It is a pity that we have not realized that it is not woman alone but entire humanity that will suffer on account of oppression of women" [Subbamma, 1985].

All in all Tess's love life, though she involved in a genuine romantic relationship with Angel Clare, he was not ready to accept her when she revealed him of her forced sexual violation. Angel Clare's similar voluntary confession on his early relationship was forgiven by Tess but unfortunately at the very moment, when Tess made her confession, she was brutally rejected since he expected a "Pure Woman" in Tess: "You were more sinned against than sinning, that I admit I forgive you, but forgiveness is not all" [Hardy, 1994]. Hither, Hardy attacks the man and the social attitudes of the society he belonged to. Is it justifiable to call Tess sinned, when men had accumulated innumerable sins in their accounts? Hardy satires men's conventional attitude towards women and double moral standards and cruel social laws. Angel could not bear Tess's relationship with Alec because he considered Tess as the symbol of purity: "You were one person; now you are another . . . the woman I have been loving is not you" [Hardy, 1994]. He loved Tess for the woman he saw in her and not her moral qualities. Nevertheless, Tess loved Angel for his moral qualities she saw in him: "I thought, Angel, that you loved me-me, my very self? If it is I you do love, O how can it be that you look and speak so? It frightens me! Having begun to love you, I love you for ever-in all changes, in all disgraces, because you are yourself. I ask no more. Then how can you, O my husband, stop loving me?" [Hardy, 1994].

Apart from being educated and civilized, Angle Clare is still captive to social conventions and customs. If a man and a woman involve in the same blunder, how can the society blames only the woman more sinned than the man? Who has created these stereotypes and double moral standards? Hardy blames none other than the social institutions and the religious establishments for the sufferings and miseries of women like Tess.

At the time of Diderot and Hardy, the religion projected the views of "natural law" to the general public and religious establishments involved in creating stereotypes according to their wills. Neither Diderot, nor Hardy blames Christianity at any point. They only criticized the harsh and cruel people attached to the religious establishments and their atrocious views which they wanted to establish as conventions and laws in the society. When looking at the protagonists and the instances created by Diderot and Hardy, one could assume that Diderot's work had made some influence on Hardy. Proving this idea further, Taylor's book titled *Hardy's Poetry* claims that Hardy used to read Diderot, "The most telling example is perhaps Diderot's elaboration of the image in *D'Alembert's Dream*, which Hardy would have known through his careful reading of Morley's *Diderot and the Encyclopaedists*" [Taylor, 1989]. It

is evident that Hardy did not copy Diderot but the circumstances around him and his society made him produce *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* which might have got nourished by his readings of Diderot. The major similarity between the two novels *The Nun* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is that none of the heroines could gain bliss in their lives and their lives got doomed because of the same cause: Religion!

Conclusion

Both *The Nun* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* are powerful literary works of the European literature which depict the double standards of the society and religion. The religion which is supposed to be the relief for humans appear as a sour and evil establishment which leads to the misery. In this study, the attention is directed towards women who got fallen and suppressed because of the Catholic Church. Suzanne in *The Nun* and Tess in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* spend a tragic life due to the social and religious oppression. This is not simply the story of Suzanne and Tess but the story of many other innocent girls who got victimized in the 18th century French society and 19th century Victorian Society. A woman's life is her own to what extent she wants with it. The social and moral condemnation had no right to decide on her life. The social and political freedoms are her rights. This work of research would leave a thought to the readers of Asian and third world countries as the 21st century is not yet free from tragedies take place in women's lives due to the power of social and religious authorities.

It is indisputable that both these novels contain some major similarities and it is feasible that Hardy had got inspired by Denis Diderot's realistic literary approach. Denis Diderot offered the realistic novel "*The Nun*" to French literature at a time when French writers not much practiced the literary approach: "realism". Thus, Hardy is considered the dominant figure of realistic English literature. Considering many of the similarities of both these literary oeuvres, we may assume that Diderot's masterpiece made some influence on Hardy. Ostensibly, both Diderot and Hardy pursue the literary realism and hence it is evident that 18th century French novel has some influence on the 19th century Victorian novel.

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