

# Role of Chance & Fate in Thomas Hardy's 'Far From The Madding Crowd'

**Dr. Awadhesh Kumar Mishra**

Asst. Prof. of English

Dr. R.M.A.S.College, Malighat, Muzaffarpur (Bihar)

**Abstract:** Fate is a prominent actor in Hardy's novel. It is, as Cazamian has said, an invisible third party in his novel. Like the Greek drama, the novels of Hardy are pervaded with a profound sense of fate. As E.M. Forster puts it, "the fate above us, not the fate working through us - that is what is eminent and memorable in Wessex novels". No doubt Hardy's scheme of tragedy admits of a large space of fate. Hardy's mind was darkened by the doctrine of necessitarianism and the philosophy of Determinism which denied free-will to the individual and which asserts that man is a mere play thing in the hand of some Blind Force. The Greek and Shakespeare call this force fate or destiny but Hardy calls it chance or circumstance or immanent will.

'Far from the Madding Crowd' is a powerful tragic expression by Hardy in which he portrays beautifully the role of chance and fate played in the lives of characters that ultimately leads to the suffering and even death of some characters. This role of chance and fate is so prominent in Hardy's fictional works that some critics call Hardy a pessimist novelist. Hardy's philosophy of life is marked with a strong note of fatalism. In Hardy's novels Destiny is character. Man is a helpless creature in the hands of Destiny or Fate. The keen eyes of fate are always looking intently on his activities with a view to intervening as and when it so likes. Man is not free to choose the type of life he wants to live. Obstacles and hindrances swarm on his path of life.

**Index Terms - Chance, Fate, Tragedy, Pessimism, Philosophy.**

In all the great novels of Hardy - 'The Mayor of Casterbridge', 'Tess', 'The Return of the Native' - Hardy has taken a very dark view of life. A cruel power bullies and tortures man, hence "Happiness is an occasional episode in the general drama of human pain" as Hardy himself has said at the end of "The Mayor of Casterbridge". Such a view should naturally be called pessimistic. It is not only gloomy but very depressing. In his early novel 'Far from The Madding Crowd' also, Hardy puts emphasis on Fate which often brings about chance, accidents and coincidences so often. It is a chance that Gabriel Oak loses all his sheep and becomes a pauper. It seems that some Blind Force is forcing Bathseba to send Valentine in her frivolous mood which upsets the balance of Boldwood's mind forever. It is just an accident that prevents Troy's marriage with Fanny. It is just a chance acquaintance that throws Troy in the orbit of Bathseba's world and causes her tremendous sufferings. One naturally feels that these incidents do not proceed from any law of logic but are regulated by a cruel caprice that dwells in the very heart of creation and leads to tragedy out of spite against humanity.

In other words, every novel of Hardy in general and 'Far from The Madding Crowd' in particular, is an artistic rendering of the central conflict between the individual's will and supreme will, or what David Cecil rightly calls it an interplay between the characters and the environment. There is a tragic tale of suffering, torment ending in the final death of the hero and heroines which constitutes the crux of the central thematic vision of Hardy's novels.

In some way Hardy's 'Far From The Madding Crowd' is a powerful and electrifying illustration of this interplay between man and his environment or what Dorothy Van Ghent rightly calls the interaction between character and fate. So, while discussing the central thematic vision of Hardy's novels, it should be kept in mind that the world of Hardy - the Wessex society - is the most powerful force which both defines and determines the central thrust of the book. Any shift of focus and emphasis can be made on behalf of one's own complete understanding of the theme of the novel as well as the central thematic vision of the novelist.

'Far From The Madding Crowd' is a powerful exploration of tragedy of characters and delineates the story of the career and personality of a man who is impulsively rash and is gifted with a strong will power and a man of fairly ambitious disposition. In the very beginning of the novel, the marriage proposal of the hero of the novel, Gabriel Oak, is dismissed by the heroine of the novel, Bathsheba Everdans. Hardy describes the dislocate look of a man with the streak of calmness followed by the non-communicative silence between the hero and heroine of the novel speaking of their meeting.

After a cruel blow given by the fate, the hero of the novel, Gabriel Oak, has to serve as a shepherd under the heroine of the novel, Bathsheba, when all his hopes of prosperity are dashed to the ground. Even after many ups and downs which come one by one in Oak's life, he remains faithful and loyal towards Bathsheba and, moreover, when Bathsheba marries Sergeant Troy, a trickster, Oak, as a stoic, endures it calmly. The opening of the novel, suggests the heroine as a vain, tainted, haughty and proud as well as conscious of her beauty, but is unconscious of the everlasting loyalty of Gabriel Oak.

The valentine sent by Bathsheba to a calm, sober and submissive Boldwood, creates a very explosive and destructive effect on him finally culminating in to the tragic end of Boldwood. Towards the end of the novel, the everlasting loyalty of Gabriel Oak is rewarded as he is united with Bathsheba. The role of chance and fate which is not so prominent in 'Far from The Madding Crowd' is found to be in its most effective form in Hardy's later novel 'The Mayor of Casterbridge', 'Tess of Durbervilles' and 'Jude the Obscure'.

Hardy's delineation power of handling the characters, particularly in case of female characters, is at its best in the present novel, the way in which he traces a remarkable transformation in Bathsheba's personality from a vain and haughty lady to a calm, sober and submissive one. In all his novels in general and 'Far from The Madding Crowd' in particular, Hardy depicts a group of rustic characters which contributes a lot in relieving the tense atmosphere with certain amusement. It is really a paradox about Hardy that the writer who has a gloomy view of life, also possesses a fine sense of humour. In fact, when we are in the company of his rustic characters either at Buck's Head Inn or at Warren's Malt House, we are kept in perpetual delight. They are purely comic figures who supply a necessary relief to the reader's emotions, disturbed by the grim tragedy. They have received the epithet "Shakespearean" and of course, they deserve it. They have the same sense of humour, the same wit and ready repartee as the clowns of Shakespeare possess. Thus, these rustic characters move through the pages of the novel 'Far From The Madding Crowd', playing the part of the Greek Chorus, drinking, singing, discussing and making comments on every event of interest. They carry with them the smell of the soil which makes them quite different from the madding crowd of the towns. These rustic characters from 'a pool of common-wisdom, a find of perpetual life'. Hardy's humour is born of the racy language of these characters. They reveal what a sunny vein of humour runs beneath the somberness of the atmosphere.

Thomas Hardy could hardly proceed without copious description of the natural and pastoral setting of his work. The simple plot details demand notes on rusticity and Hardy's Victorian sensibilities allow attention to humble characters and the hardships of their lives. Gabriel Oak works as a shepherd and it is on a farm that he becomes serviceable to his employer Bathsheba and grows in her estimation. The other characters and their country ways contrast with Gabriel's and Bathsheba's manners and interest in reading; these country characters read a rural setting for consistency in their portraits. However, the intensity of detail in landscape descriptions points to more important uses of natural imagery in the development of the work. In 'Far From The Madding Crowd' Thomas Hardy shows us a world in which human beings are at peace with nature. The Wessex people living in close contact with Nature, are its vital growths and manifestations. Divorced from the scenery, they are weak and meaningless; moving in it, they are so much a part of it that they express its primeval grandeur. Like Wordsworth, and possibly in a higher degree, Hardy shows his sympathy between man and nature. His peasants are as much products of a particular soil as the very glades in which they live. Hardy is a worshipper of nature and his reverent attitude towards her controls and colours all his writing. Towards religion in the conventional sense, his temper is hostile; he is a pagan whose faiths and sentiments are rooted in the distant past. Such religious sentiments as he has attached itself to things immemorially sacred - the Sun, the Moon, the Stars, the March of seasons, 'the loom of silent powers weaving the web of life', the worship of fecundity, the spirit of creativeness, the sense of the eternal in time.

Hardy might not be a radical iconoclast like Shaw, but certainly is a radical thinker and a philosopher who has structured and shaped almost all of his works on the strong edifice of his artistic vision and philosophy of life. In that sense, he is the most discussed and misunderstood artist whose vision has been explored as per the suitability, taste and need of different scholars from time to time.

While for Devid Cecil, he is the most pessimistic novelist with a tragic view of life, but for Arnold Kettle, his novels are gloom architecture into a complex pattern of life, whereas for F.R. Leavis, Hardy might not be a tragic artist but the final vision of life he portrays is that of poetic justice and triumph of goodness and the virtuous. So, the roll call of past and present scholars give us a very disturbing and even the conflicting picture of Hardy as a novelist

mentioned, appeared to be conglomeration, complicating and even contradictory views. But the comprehensive and understanding of Hardy's philosophy can be achieved by making a close and incisive scrutiny of all the texts of his novels in general and 'Far from the Madding Crowd' in particular.

Unlike Dickens, Hardy believes in a different and even indignant super power assuming different grabs like nature, environment, destiny, fate and chance which is responsible for all happenings and misfortunes, tensions and conflicts, struggle and defeat of human beings in life course central to the philosophy of the novelist which is the concept of supreme will vis-a-vis individual will which are invariable and at loggerhead and opposed to each other as David Cecil points out :

"A struggle between man, on the one hand and on the other, an omnipotent and indifferent fate- that is Hardy's interpretation of human situation." This struggle determines the character and nature of his drama. Like other dramas, this turns on a conflict, but the conflict is not, as in most novels between one man and another, or between man and an institution. Man in Hardy's novels is ranged against impersonal forces, the forces conditioning his fate. Not that his characters themselves are always aware of this. Bathsheba looks on Troy as the author of her misfortunes; Henchard is obsessed by his hatred for Farfrae. But from the point of vantage from which Hardy surveys their stories, Bathsheba and Henchard are seen to be under a delusion. For those whom they think their enemies are as much as themselves puppets in the hands of fate.

Infact Fate, not they, is ultimately responsible for their quarrels and subsequent miseries. Unless they were destined to do so, they would not be in conflict with each other. Not that Hardy refuses to make moral distinctions between his characters. On the country, his leading figures divide themselves into instruments for good and for evil. This line between them is determined by their attitude to themselves. All alike are striving for happiness.

It may also be noted here that forces of Fate in Hardy's novels in general and in 'Far From The Madding Crowd' in particular, incarnate themselves in two form - as Chance and as Love. Of these, Chance is the most typical. In no other novels does chance exercise such a conspicuous influence on the course of events. Hardy has been blamed for this; and no doubt, he does overdo it. But to condemn his use of chance altogether is to misunderstand his view of life. In life we witness a battle between Men and Destiny. Destiny is an inscrutable force; we do not understand its nature for its intentions and we cannot, therefore, predict what it will do. In consequence, its acts always show themselves in the guise of inexplicable, unexpected blows of chance.

Hardy himself says about human destiny, "The view of life as a thing to be put up with, replacing that zest for existence which was so intense in early civilization must ultimately enter so thoroughly into the constitution of the advanced races that its facial expression will become accepted as a new artistic departure. People already feel that a man who lives without disturbing a curve of feature, or setting a mark of mental concern anywhere upon himself, is too far removed from modern perceptiveness to a modern type."

This evidently shows that people will gradually develop a feeling of resignation and indifference because it is useless to fight against Omnipotent power. But, on the other hand, it is advisable to develop an attitude of resistance against the socks and bolts of destiny. The development of a mental shell will enable the man to overcome the depression that will enfeeble his faculties to give a brave fight to his averse fate. In fact, Hardy pictures the future generations, not as beautiful and robust like the Hellenic figures, but as people physically weak but mentally strong. Hardy is of the opinion that in future, the idea of mere joy of living will be replaced by a sense of resignation and indifference towards the joys and sorrows that life offers and that people will develop a mental outlook that will neither feel joy at good fortune nor will it be shocked at the unkind blows of destiny. In the words of Edmund Gosse, "Abandoned by God, treated with scorn by Nature, man lies helplessly at the mercy of those 'purblind Doomsters', accident, chance and time, from which he has had to endure injury and insult from the cradle to the grave".

However, the philosophical vision presented by Hardy will not be completely discussed and understood without understanding the Omnipotent role of the cosmic forces of nature translated in terms of fate of man that thematically justifies the re-appearance of Sergeant Troy, a man who is fully responsible for the final tragedy of Fanny Robin and also whatever is left.

In other words, the tragedy of all characters in 'Far from The Madding Crowd' is not a tragedy of a simple arithmetic equation of a tragedy of rise and fall of human beings within a given socio-cultural and psycho-spiritual complex, rather in the tragic death of a few characters. There is a powerful illustration of Hardy's central philosophy as a novelist where the human life is depicted as an inevitable and inherently doomed of what Elazebeth Jane says in

'The Mayor of Caster bridge' after the death of Michael Henchard when she says : "Happiness is but an occasional episode in the general drama of pain and suffering."

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