

“Dirge of the Fallen Woman in European Literature: when religion turns sour and evil to make the innocent female soul suppressed”

Indiwaree Poornima Wickramasinghe

Lecturer (Probationary) in French

Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka

indiwaree_wickramasinghe@yahoo.com

1. Abstract

This paper will examine 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*.

Keywords: Church, English Literature, French Literature, Religion, Women

Introduction and research problem/issue

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. Proving this fact, Subbamma (1985) says: "The woman has been relegated to the second place,

oppressed by society and religion and dominated by man." Diderot's heroine Suzanne's destiny was decided by her mother and the church. Suzanne, who always wanted to spend a life full of energy and happiness, had to get herself imprisoned in a church to make her mother exempt her own sins. Tess, even after devoting her whole life for the sake of offering a comfortable life for her family was doubted by the family and insulted by the society and the church. What is the duty of the religion or the church? They are to exploit and to suppress the innocent souls or to cure them? Diderot's 18th century novel, *The Nun* is a powerful criticism on religious injustice and this study analyses the way its message was transferred to the 19th century English novel. This study analyses how Diderot and Hardy brought out "realism" to the world through their novels.

Research Methodology

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 will be 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. Hence, this study largely relies on the comparison between the primary sources and major literary criticisms appeared related to them.

4. Results and findings

As this is an analytical study, the major objective is to bring out the similarities between 18th century French novel and 19th century English novel through an analysis. Both *The Nun* and

Tess of the D'Urbervilles depict the life of innocent young girls who suffer immensely in their lives due to their family and social obligations. Suzanne Simonin in *The Nun* had to devote her life for religion for the sake of helping her mother to exempt her sins. It's Suzanne's mother who commits adultery but it is Suzanne who finally experiences the rage of sin. She had to pay the debt of getting an illegitimate birth. Similarly, Tess in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* went on finding a job for the sake of helping her family to overcome the financial difficulties but finally it is Tess herself who had to be a victim of sexual violation.

The sin was committed by Alec D'Urberville but it is Tess who had to become a mother of an illegitimate child who was not even given the right to get baptised in the Catholic Church. Neither Suzanne, nor Tess could write the pages of their own destiny but the society and church decided what should come next in their lives.

Though *The Nun* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* belong to two different centuries and two different origins, they carry similar themes and the aim of both these novels is to reveal the social and religious injustice. Denis Diderot is considered one of the renowned 18th century philosophers in France and he wrote this novel in a period when

the social realism was less emphasised. It is apparent that Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* has several similar characteristics of *The Nun* and both these novels together create a wave to stand against injustice. Both Diderot and Hardy criticises the so called social standards and respected religious institutions. They question the reason behind the presence of religious institutions and both these works are a harsh criticism of the prestigious 18th and 19th century Catholic Church.

Conclusions, implications and significance

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 appears as a sour and evil establishment which leads to the misery. In this study, the attention is directed towards women who got 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.

References

Black, C. (1892). "Tess of the D'Urbervilles," *Illustrated London News*, 9, 50.

Diderot, D., & May, G. (1975). *La religieuse. Préface de La religieuse*. Paris: Hermann.

Subbamma, M. (1985). *Women: Tradition and Culture*. New Delhi: Sterling.

*Corresponding Author, Tel: 0094775204892

E-mail Address: Indiwaree_wickramasinghe@yahoo.com