



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

**WOMEN AS COMMODITIES IN TWO  
SELECTED NOVELS OF THOMAS HARDY**

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**FBMK 2009 6**



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**Master of Arts  
Universiti Putra Malaysia**

**2009**



**WOMEN AS COMMODITIES IN  
TWO SELECTED NOVELS OF THOMAS HARDY**

**By**

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**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra  
Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Arts**

**February 2009**



**In The Name of Allah, the Most Gracious and the Most Merciful**

**Specially dedicated**

**To**

**My supervisor:**

**Dr. Noritah Omar**



Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment  
of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts

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OF THOMAS HARDY**

By

**ROYA NIKANDAM**

**FEBRUARY 2009**

**Chairperson: Noritah Omar, PhD**

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This research examines the Lacanian psychoanalysis principles underlying selected Hardy's novels, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *The Mayor of the Casterbridge*, and underscores the hypotheses of psychoanalytic feminists such as Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray who based their theories on Jacques Lacan's signification of the symbolic order. The study applies Lacanian concepts as adapted by Kristeva and Irigaray to illustrate men's control over women and women's resistance to men's intention to objectify them.

The main theme adopted to study Hardy's novels is the Unconscious of the Patriarchy in the Victorian Imagination. It is divided into two sections: Lacan and Feminist Psychoanalysts. The discussion will highlight women faced the threat of inferiority and it explains the symbolic world of Lacan attempts to turn women into commodities.



Women's power to destabilize the structures of this particular society will also be expounded by referring to the works of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray. It will be explained that through the connection women have with semiotic language, maternity, abjection/death, and mimesis women are able to threaten the symbolic law.

By investigating these theoretical observations, I hope to highlight the continuing issue of commodifying the value and dignity of women which can be observed in the patriarchal system of the Victorian era. The study specifically analyses the reactions of male characters in the novels towards the identity of female protagonists which lead to the conclusion that a woman's self is worthless, valueless and is totally rejected in the symbolic law. In the light of feminist's psychoanalytic concepts, the study finds the female capability to threaten the unconscious of her identity in the Victorian symbolic era.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia  
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sastera

**WANITA SEBAGAI KOMODITI DALAM DUA NOVEL  
OLEH THOMAS HARDY**

Oleh

**ROYA NIKANDAM**

**FEBRUARI 2009**

**Pengerusi: Noritah Omar, PhD**

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Kajian ini meneliti penggunaan prinsip psikoanalisis Lacan dalam novel-novel terpilih oleh Thomas Hardy, iaitu *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* dan *The Mayor of the Casterbridge*, serta memberi penekanan kepada hipotesis pakar psikoanalisis feminis seperti Julia Kristeva dan Luce Irigaray yang berdasarkan teori Jacques Lacan mengenai kesignifikan order simbolik. Kajian ini mengaplikasi konsep Lacan yang diadaptasikan oleh Kristeva dan Irigaray untuk menunjukkan kuasa lelaki ke atas wanita dan tentangan wanita terhadap niat lelaki untuk menjadikan mereka sebagai objek.

Tema utama yang digunakan untuk mengkaji novel Hardy ialah *The Unconscious of the Patriarchy in the Victorian Imagination*. Tema ini dibahagikan pula kepada dua bahagian iaitu: Lacan dan pakar Psikoanalisis Feminis. Dalam perbincangan ini, bagaimana wanita berdepan dengan ancaman inferioriti akan ditunjuk dan bagaimana dunia simbolik Lacan cuba menukar wanita sebagai komoditi akan dijelaskan. Kuasa



wanita untuk mentidakstabilkan struktur masyarakat akan diperincikan dengan merujuk kepada Julia Kristeva dan Luce Irigaray. Akan dijelaskan juga bahawa melalui hubungan wanita dengan bahasa semiotik, sifat keibuan, kematian, dan peniruan, wanita mampu mengancam undang-undang simbolik.

Dengan mengkaji pemerhatian teoretikal ini, saya berharap dapat membuktikan isu menjadikan nilai dan maruah wanita sebagai komoditi yang berterusan dan dapat dilihat dalam sistem patriarki era Victoria. Kajian ini menganalisis secara terperinci reaksi watak-watak lelaki di dalam kedua-dua novel ini terhadap protagonis wanita yang membawa kepada kesimpulan bahawa diri wanita itu tidak berharga, tidak bernilai serta ditolak oleh undang-undang simbolik. Dengan menggunakan proses psikoanalisis Lacan, kajian ini mendapati bahawa wanita mampu menolak tanggapan dunia ini dengan mengetahui kebolehan diri mereka yang terpendam.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

All Praise and Thanks are due to Allah who empowered me and forbearance to complete my study. My warmest thanks go to my supervisor who encouraged me to complete this dissertation. Always, when I faltered, she assisted me in some way, great or small, to return to the task. My special thanks are due to my supervisor, Dr. Noritah Omar whose superb organizational skills and judicious readings aided me immeasurably in bringing the study to completion. I am deeply indebted to her, from the beginning of this project, when she assisted me in selecting a topic, to the end; she has unfailingly offered sagacious advice and friendly encouragement. Dr. Noritah Omar's breadth of knowledge and enthusiastic approach to her reading my study has inspired me anew. Special thanks are also extended to my research committee member Dr. Washima Che Dan, for her special skills in language and structural organizations. I owe her a debt of special importance which can never be repaid.

On a more personal level, I must also thank my parents whose unending encouragement and copious support have enabled me to become the person I am today.



I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on the 24<sup>th</sup> February 2009 to conduct the final examination of Roya Nikandam on her Master of Arts thesis entitled “Women as Commodities in Two Selected Novels of Thomas Hardy” in accordance with Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U.(A) 106] 15 March 1998. The committee recommends that the student be awarded the Master of Arts.

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## DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously, and it not concurrently, submitted for any other degree at Universiti Putra Malaysia or at any other institution.

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**Roya Nikandam**

Date: 27 April 2009



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS / NOTATIONS

AP	Arguing with the Phallus
JL	Jacques Lacan and Feminist Epistemology
Mayor	The Mayor of Casterbridge
PH	Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection
RPL	Revolution in Poetic Language
SG	Sexes and Genealogies
SP	Speculum of the Other Woman
Tess	Tess of the d'Urbervilles
TLS	The Language of the Self
TS	This Sex Which is Not One



# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Preamble

One of the most significant developments in literary studies in the second half of the twentieth century is feminist literary criticism. The feminist literary criticism of today is the direct product of the women's movement of the 1960s. It advocates equal rights for all women in all areas of life: socially, politically, professionally, personally, economically, aesthetically and psychologically (121). Paula A. Treichler defines feminist theory in this way:

Feminist theory, emphasizing the importance of women in the world, seeks to build general accounts of experience from particularities. We are still discovering 'the nature and scope' of these particularities and exploring what kind of theory we are able to create (Kramarae and Treichler 447).

Thus, in feminist criticism of the 1970s, considerable attention was paid by feminist theorists to psychoanalytic models of sexuality and subjectivity. Psychoanalytic feminism, with the help of psychological theories, challenges the concept of women as being considered secondary to men. The dispute over the relationship between psychoanalysis and feminism seems to have been started by Kate Millet in her *Sexual Politics* in which she recognized the contradictions in Sigmund Freud's texts, and focused on Freud's theory of femininity, in which anatomical differences directly affect the structure of the feminine character (Weedon 43).





To defend Freud against Millet's accusations, Juliet Mitchell published her book entitled *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* in which she argued that Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis provide a useful conceptual framework for understanding the construction of human sexuality. She believes that the apparent phallocentrism<sup>1</sup> of psychoanalysis is descriptive of the state of society rather than a precondition of human sociality (Humm 65). Provoked by Millet's view of Freud and Jacques Lacan's theories as the origin of women's oppression, some other feminists like Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous challenged Lacan's ideas on the Imaginary world and the Symbolic world that have been widely used to understand the development of the personality of women in social constructions.

Therefore, this study will trace Lacanian psychoanalytic principles narrowed down to the symbolic order and its processes. It examines the unconscious of Victorian cultural traditions in the construction of female's identity as commodity in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), in light of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray's psychoanalytic concepts, especially semiotic language, maternity, abjection/death, and mimesis, thereby exploring the female capability to threaten the unconscious of her identity in the Victorian symbolic era. In order to explore the nature of Hardy's insight into the unconscious, socially contradictory presentation of his female characters as a male writer, I begin the initial part of the first chapter by examining the various responses of nineteenth and twentieth century critics to Hardy's portrayal of the heroines in his novels.

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<sup>1</sup> A term relating to the advancement of the masculine as the source of power and meaning through cultural, ideological and social systems. Spender, Dale. *Man Made Language*. p.189



## 1.2 Thomas Hardy and Women

The unconventional women in Hardy's novels are often more complicated and engaging than their male counterparts. A nameless 1879 review of his novels remarked that Hardy's "story is always the story of one woman in her relations to two or three men; and it is part of this scheme that, though the men do not lack individuality, they are chiefly introduced with reference to the women, and only fully developed at the points of contact with them" (qtd. in Assmann 10). Even Hardy's remarkable ability to depict vivid female characters may have been the factor which led early reviewers to suspect that his works were in fact written by a woman. In a review essay written in 1883, Havelock Ellis once again referred to the question of Hardy's gender:

Even when this was seen [that Hardy was not George Eliot], many people were still uncertain about the sex of the new writer, and reviewers of Thomas Hardy's works were occasionally doubtful whether to speak of 'him' or 'her'. The cause of this uncertainty is not hard to find. The minute observation, the delicate insight, the conception of love as the one business of life, and a singularly charming reticence in its delineation, are qualities which, if not universally characteristic of women's work in fiction, are such as might with propriety be attributed to it—at all events from an *a priori* standpoint. (qtd. in Assmann 12)

Some wonder whether Hardy was a critic of current social situations or simply another author reifying the current patriarchal ideology. Margaret Higonnet points out that "Hardy's texts [...] have been censored for their sexual content, admired for their frankness, decried as misogynist, and described as feminist" (5). With every new novel, Hardy seemed "to have been capable of persuading both his editor and himself that the story envisaged would not actually transgress [...] the unwritten conventions" governing publications of the time. However, "as each new story took shape it proved to dwell not incidentally but centrally upon questions of sexuality and technical immorality almost certain to provoke criticism and complaint" (291).

Did Hardy wish to defy Victorian norms, or was he simply so confident in the worth of his writing that he did not consider the possible negative reaction to his work? Michael Millgate believes that “Hardy’s peculiar difficulties with his editors were largely the product of his own indecision, of a characteristic reluctance to take firm positions” (292).

Some critics believe that Hardy’s characters are in keeping with the prevalent image of woman in the Victorian era; he often portrays women in their most noble role of spiritual guide and loving nurturer. For example, according to Rosemary Sumner, in Hardy’s *The Woodlanders* (1887), Marty South has “perpetual faithfulness” to Giles; and in Hardy’s first published novel, *Desperate Remedies* (1871), the heroine Cytherea Graye, chooses to be self-sacrificing rather than seek her own happiness, marrying a man she does not love in order to gain financial resources for saving her brother’s life (qtd. in Jumonville 43).

M. Houghton also emphasizes how *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* shows the heroine’s capacity for suffering (435), while he regards Eustacia’s pride in *The Return of the Native* (1878) as the source of her inability to compromise with life; on the whole he finds Hardy’s women “so small and helpless” that Hardy is “pleading for the weaker sex” in depicting them (439-40). Similarly, while Virginia Woolf believes that women comprise the greater part of Hardy’s interest, they stand as the lesser of the two sexes. She claims that men carry the force of rebellion in his novels; women serve to demonstrate a capacity for suffering (263).



Some of the negative public responses of the nineteenth century seem to have come from women readers. Edmund Gosse suggested that “women did not like Hardy’s novels and attributed this phenomenon to the author’s concept of the feminine character” (qtd. in Assmann 13). He later pointed out that the “modern English novelist has created, and has faithfully repeated, a demure, ingenuous, and practically inhuman type of heroine, which has flattered womankind, and which female readers now imperatively demand as an encouragement” (14).

Some other feminist critics tend to view Hardy as either a sinner or a saint, a proud defender of female honour or a villain willing to pitifully abase women to serve his own creative needs. As Judith Mitchell wonders: “How does a female reader—particularly a modern feminist reader—read Thomas Hardy? Does she applaud his feminism? Deplore his sexism?” She further observes that “feminist critics seem undecided whether to accept Hardy with distaste or to reject him with reluctance” (qtd. in Kyte 7). Much of the criticism Hardy received was centered on the way in which he characterized his heroines, resulting in the characters, and Hardy himself, being viewed as highly immoral. In 1881, Charles Keegan Paul, a contemporary of Hardy’s, had this to say about Hardy's female characters:

They are all charming; they are all flirts from their cradle; they are all in love with more than one man at once; they seldom, if they marry at all, marry the right man; and while well-conducted for the most part, are somewhat lacking in moral sense, and have only rudimentary souls. (qtd. in Kyte 11)

Based on the responses of many critics, it is evident that there are many complexities and paradoxes in Hardy’s female characters which are not yet completely defined.



However, I believe that Hardy, overwhelmed with his unconscious bias as a male writer, shapes his female characters accordingly. This will be clarified with the aid of Lacanian psychoanalytic theories. Hardy not only portrays his female characters as commodities, but also stands as a symbol of a deeply patriarchal Victorian society, since it is through his portrayal that these values are reinforced.

### **1.3 Statement of the Problem**

Reading the two selected novels of Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, one can understand that Hardy both typifies and contests Victorian cultural traditions, particularly in constructing ideas of male and female gender and identity. The paradox inherent in Hardy's novels, especially the two novels studied here, is that female characters have been portrayed simultaneously as suppressed and liberated. This paradox can be justified by the concurrence of Hardy's active shaping of the heroines' unconscious, and the potential of the female unconscious to reverse the situation. Thus, Hardy's texts will be analyzed to discover the ways in which women are represented as commodities under a patriarchal and prejudicial society, using Lacanian psychoanalysis. Using Lacanian psychoanalysis, one can explore the construction of identity related to the unconscious mind; what makes Lacan especially relevant to the field of literary and cultural studies is his central presupposition that the unconscious is structured like a language.

Lacan believes that the unconscious is governed by the rules of the signifier, as it is a language that translates sensory images into a structure. We can only know the unconscious through speech and language; therefore, similar kinds of relationships exist between unconscious elements, signifiers and other forms of language. For



Lacan, the unconscious is constituted through the subject's articulation in the symbolic order. The Lacanian unconscious is rather the effect of a trans-individual symbolic order upon the subject. In other words, the unconscious is not biological but it is something that signifies, and is the effect-the impact-upon the subject of the trans-individual symbolic order, and is structured like a language (Homer 68-9). In this case, Lacanian psychoanalytic principles will help to elucidate the construction of women as commodities in the Victorian cultural tradition.

The assumptions of some psychoanalytic feminists such as Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray can partly address the apparent inferiority of Victorian women and materialize their liberation. Therefore, the focus of this research is to examine the manifestation of women as commodities in the symbolic law, and the paths that women have taken to overcome their oppressive exclusion within that law. These aspects will be investigated to clarify the role of women as commodities under the domination of a patriarchal society, and how women can manifest their capability to threaten this order.

#### **1.4 Objectives of the Study**

The first study objective is to examine the representation of women as commodities under the patriarchal prejudice of Victorian society, in selected works of Thomas Hardy. This is to underscore the patriarchal authority, and its suppression of women by restraining them and viewing them as selfless victims; to achieve this, I will first explain their inferior and passive roles in the Victorian economic order. Then, I intend to use the principles of Lacanian psychoanalysis to study the role of the unconscious in a male writer's construction of the female identity in Victorian

society. The third objective is to explore theoretical works of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray to confirm if Hardy's heroines can be liberated or whether they remain under the Victorian symbolic order. Hence, the following are my research questions:

1. How do the principles of Lacanian psychoanalysis help explain the construction of women as commodities within the Victorian cultural tradition? This question will help me to obtain a better understanding of the unconscious of the Victorian cultural tradition, which relates to making women passive and muted.
2. How do feminist psychoanalytic principles explain the emancipation of Victorian women from their status as commodities? This question will allow me to see if their liberation can be materialized.
3. Are the Lacanian and feminist psychoanalytic techniques compatible in assisting readers to witness the suppression of women in the works of a male writer, Thomas Hardy? This question will allow me to examine the extent to which Lacanian and feminist psychoanalytic principles are compatible.

### **1.5 Scope of the Study**

The scope of this study is restricted to the works of Thomas Hardy. The novels under study are *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* published (1891) and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886). This study traces Lacanian psychoanalytic principles narrowed down to the symbolic order and its processes. It focuses on the workings of the unconscious upon Victorian cultural traditions, in the construction of the female identity as commodity which is embedded in the female protagonists of Hardy's novels.

This study also illuminates women's potential power in light of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray's psychoanalytic concepts, especially semiotic language, maternity, abjection/death, and mimesis, thereby exploring the Victorian woman's capability to threaten the unconscious of their identity in that symbolic era.

For both novels, the researcher will attempt to unravel the fact that the Victorian culture tended to equate women with their supposed inferior role. The traditional characterization of females as irrational and incapable of abstract reasoning was given as a justification to prevent them functioning as men did, reflected in Hardy's works which concern female identities struggling in a patriarchal system, where they are treated as secondary beings or outcasts.

Therefore, this study suggests the relevance of psychoanalytic feminist perspectives in exposing various power structures specific to the Victorian heroines, and in challenging the culture in which they live. As feminist critic Rosemarie Morgan points out, such a powerful and modern depiction of women tends to wreak a little havoc on the Victorians; for in presenting Victorians with female characters who did not conform to the stereotype, "Hardy not only offended against properties but also threatened the status quo, hitting at the very structure and foundation of society itself" (xii). In terms of relevance, each heroine articulates a form of resistance, sometimes powerful, and always beneficial, in its articulation of the double standards (Victorian and contemporary) placed on women. Since such terms of commodification exist today, women can learn from such strategies of resistance and reverse the inferior symbol of women in the present society.





## **1.6 Conceptual Theory**

I choose Lacan's psychoanalytic theory as a way to understand the psyche or the unconscious of the Victorian construction of gender. I will explore the process of the construction of the symbolic order. The close relation between Lacanian and feminist theories has led me to adopt the latter as well, as espoused by Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, in order to investigate the interconnection of these theories through the manifestation of the woman's role as a commodity. This manifestation refers to the ways in which the female characters are victimized in the patriarchal order, which transforms them into commodities in what Lacan terms the *symbolic* male-dominated setting. Therefore, it is crucial to study Kristeva's discourse on the connection of women to semiotic language, maternity, abjection/death, and also to examine Luce Irigaray's theory of mimesis. These concepts are considered under the postulation of Lacan's psychoanalytic theories, to clarify the attempt of the patriarchal order to repress the identities of women by depicting them as incomplete, and how they can contest this symbolic patriarchal view of the Victorian era. Therefore, I use the theories to analyze the novels mainly to study the interaction of the heroines with the male characters and the characterization of the heroines within the limits of the masculine world.

## **1.7 Significance of the Study**

There already exist an abundance of studies on Thomas Hardy and the Victorian era. Some significant studies that I have used to augment my own explore issues in relation to the body: for instance, Sondra M. Archimedes focuses on the nineteenth-century literary representation of the pathologized female body in relation to a biomedical discourse about gender and society in Victorian England.