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HARDY'S *THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE*: DESIRE AS 'IMMANENT DESIGN'

Dr GAYATRI GOSWAMI

Associate Professor and HoD of English
Sibsagar College, Assam, India.

ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to arrive at a critical understanding of Thomas Hardy's novel *The Return of the Native* with a certain reliance on Narratological perspective. Here, an endeavour has been made to establish 'desire' as Key-concept and throughout the paper issues like the role and position of the narrator, narrator's resort to retrospective narration, the way desire is immanent within the 'story world' are taken into consideration. In this paper, 'desire' is taken as the core of the investigation because, in the novel *The Return of the Native* 'desire' is more intense, poignant and particular. The concept like 'desire' necessitates a psychoanalytic exploration of character's consciousness reflected in narrative. Moreover, narrative is fundamentally intertwined with the psyche and representation of psychological realm of character which can be interpreted with the concept of psychoanalysis. So, it is an endeavour to consider the novel *The Return of the Native* in the light of such thought.

Key-words: Desire, Narratology, Psychoanalysis.



In Thomas Hardy's aesthetic world 'desire' is not only an inevitable component, but it appears as a dominant dynamic of his creations. Especially in all the fourteen novels of Hardy, 'desire' is seen as a vital energy creating a new and a better realm of existence though its reverse turn is also apparent. In *The Return of the Native* (1878) desire works as a driving force as the narrative fabric of the novel manifests 'desire' with its manifold implications. In this novel 'desire' with its varied implications is seen to be integrated with the lives of the characters in such a way that it even influences human subjectivity, creating a visibly poignant universe.

The thematic design of *The Return of the Native* embodies disappointment, frustrated desire, infidelity, ambition and unrequited love and the focal point of the novel is the question of 'desire'. The novel articulates a detailed description of how the central character is driven by and responds to the concept of desire. In the novel Hardy dramatizes

the rise and fall of the protagonist and creates a pattern of regress and progress linked to the motif of 'desire'.

The Return of the Native can be interpreted in terms of desire as the main theme of the novel is connected with the search for social status as a greatly desired condition. If we accept the definition of 'desire' as a strong feeling of wanting something, the fundamental impulse behind *The Return of the Native* is that of desire. The term 'desire' indicates a central but diffuse and by no means unified concept or set of concepts. According to Michel Foucault, "the more recent researchers of psychoanalysis, linguistics and ethnology have 'decentred' the subject in relation to the laws of his desire", and the concept of desire has assumed an important but varied function in the field of theory.¹ Freud's essay 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' takes us closer to understanding the formal organization of desire – the illusion of a striving toward perfection is here

explained by instinctual repression and the persisting tension of the repressed instinct, and the resulting difference between the pleasure of satisfaction demanded and that achieved. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings* Freud says:

...The gulf between the level of gratificatory pleasure demanded and the level actually achieved produces that driving force that prevents the individual from resting content with any satisfaction he ever contrives, and instead—as the poet says—he ‘presses ever onward unbridled and untamed.’ (Mephisto in Faust I, Faust’s Study)²

In Freud’s view we are driven by the desire for pleasure as well as by desire to avoid pain. He further argues that pleasure is an enigma in the process of human development and identifies ‘repetition’ or ‘the replication of the original experience in identical terms’ as a source of pleasure.³ ‘Freudian wisdom’ induces us that there is a gap between ‘desire’ and ‘delivery’. This gap or process of subtraction of Freud’s basic concept is fundamental to Lacan’s theory of desire, born of the gap or split between need and demand. For Jacques Lacan, ‘desire for the other’ is the constituting part of the subject; moreover, desire according to him is necessarily linked to phallogentrism and also constituted by the hysteric in the very moment of speaking.⁴ Lacan helps us to understand how the aims and imaginings of desire move us from the realm of basic drives to highly elaborated fictions, as desire necessarily becomes textual by way of a specifically narrative impulse, since desire is, ‘an insistence of meaning towards the occulted objects of desire.’⁵

The gulf between the thing demanded and the actual, final achievement constitutes the central dynamics in *The Return of the Native*. Moreover, throughout the novel, the struggle to achieve the desired object is inherent and enhances the progress in the action, since desire may be defined as, ‘metonymy, a forward drive’ in any narrative.⁶

The title *The Return of the Native* indicates that it is concerned with Clym Yeobright, the protagonist of the novel. Having found the life of a

diamond merchant in Paris meaningless, he has returned to his native heath to find some worthwhile purpose: ‘...and I want to do some worthy thing before I die. As a schoolmaster I think to do it—a schoolmaster to the poor and ignorant, to teach them what nobody else will’ (RN, p233). His attitude is that the austerity of Egdon is suited to his soul. To him the heath is beautiful in all its differing moods, and he finds ‘haggard Egdon’ appealing (RN, p54). Clym is presented as a basically incorruptible native:

‘If anyone knew the heath well it was Clym. Clym had been so inwoven with the heath in his boyhood that anybody could look upon it without thinking of him.’ (RN, p226)

He is an idealist with the ‘conviction that the want of most men is knowledge of a sort which brings wisdom than affluence’ (RN, p230). His idealism and desire to teach his fellow man ‘how to brest the misery they are born to’ can as easily be seen to derive from his somewhat emotional response to life as from any ingrained habit of contemplation or obsession with books (RN, p233). Clym’s desire to enlighten the people of the heath becomes an obsession, and this obsession with an idealistic course of life has a regressive impact depriving him of all the pleasures and joys of life. Thus, the most significant movement of the novel is not the development of Clym’s moral awareness, but the dwindling of his desires and consequent loss of mental and emotional vitality:

The speaker was bareheaded, and the breeze at each waft gently lifted and lowered his hair, somewhat too thin for a man of his years, these still numbering less than thirty three. He wore a shade over his eyes, and his face was pensive and lined;... (RN, p474)

Thus he is ‘marked with decay’, for his strenuous mental pressure springs out of his unfulfilled desires. (RN, p474) Our last view of Clym is not of a man who has triumphed, but of one who has been defeated and when, as preacher Clym takes Eustacia’s place on Rainbarrow, he is hardly an heroic figure. Clym is shown through the penultimate sentences as an ineffectual preacher:

Some believed him, and some believed not; some said that his words were commonplace,

others complained of his want of theological doctrine; while others again remarked that it was well enough for a man to take to preaching who could not see to do anything else. (RN, p474)

His mental and emotional state has been conveyed by the narrator well:

On the Sunday after this wedding an unusual sight was to be seen on Rainbarrow. From a distance there simply appeared to be a motionless figure standing on the top of the tumulus, just as Eustacia had stood on that lonely summit some two years and a half before. (RN, p473)

Clym's ultimate decision of giving up establishing 'a good private school for farmers' sons' and becoming a preacher shows the essential futility of his desire (RN, p233). His intellectual fantasies become as impossible as Eustacia's dreams of luxury and romance.

In *the Return of the Native*, Eustacia is a typical example of a desire without fulfilment. She is also a tragic victim who dissipates her life, finding it impossible to balance the outer world with her inner world of feeling and expectation. In the novel Eustacia is introduced not as a native of Egdon – she comes from a fashionable seaside resort Budmouth with an idealized vision of a glamorous Paris. At the end of the second chapter Eustacia is thus introduced:

As the resting man looked at the barrow he became aware that its summit, hitherto the highest object in the whole prospect round, was surmounted by something higher. It rose from the semi-globular mound like a spike from a helmet....

There the form stood, motionless as the hill beneath....

The form was so much like an organic part of the entire motionless structure that to see it move... The figure perceptibly gave up its fixity, shifted a step or two, and turned round...The movement had been sufficient to show more clearly the characteristics of the figure, and that it was a woman's. (RN, p62)

This woman is none other than Eustacia. A full chapter is devoted to describing her

character in which she is presented as a narcissistic, melancholic creature, 'the raw material of divinity'(RN, p118). The essential attributes of feeling and imagination inspired by the character of Eustacia are illustrated by Hardy in his treatment of her as a being compounded of vast and vague sensuality:

Her presence brought memories of such things as Bourbon roses, rubies and tropical midnights; her moods recalled lotus-eaters and the march in 'Athalie'; her motions, the ebb and flow of the sea; her voice, the viola. In a dim light, and with a slight rearrangement of her hair, her general figure might have stood for that of either of the higher female deities. (RN, p119)

Her emotions, too, are unspecific and limitless: 'To be loved to madness-such was her great desire...And she seemed to long for the abstraction called passionate love more than for any particular lover' (RN, p121). Her restlessness is also incorporated into the topographical space; because she is bored by the location: 'O deliver my heart from this fearful gloom and loneliness: send me great love from somewhere, else I shall die' (RN, p122). Her reproach to life is directed against those forces greater than human—Destiny, Fate, Chance. She imagines herself a heroic character, and cannot understand that her greatest failure is her inability to accept the realities of life. Thus she cannot ultimately give herself to Wildeva because:

'He's not great enough for me to give myself to—he does not suffice for my desire! ... If he had been a Saul or a Buonaparte – ah! ... How I have tried and tried to be a splendid woman, and how destiny has been against me! ... I do not deserve my lot! ... O, the cruelty of putting me into this ill-conceived world! I was capable of much, but I have been injured and blighted and crushed by things beyond control! (RN, p421)

Her conceptions of reality are, like her portrait, dim and romanticized and her attitudes are consequently erroneously based on the great and glorious figures and episodes of the past:

Her high gods were William the Conqueror, Strafford, and Napoleon Buonaparte, as they had appeared in the Lady's History used at

the establishment in which she was educated. Had she been a mother she would have christened her boys such names as Saul or Sisera in preference to Jacob or David, neither of whom she admired. (RN, p122)

Eustacia desires through the heroes of the past to fill her imagination and she wants to mediate her desire of these heroic figures through her offspring.

Eustacia wants to exercise power over men by way of her beauty, but she is incapable of loving for long and cannot find adequate equivalence for her desire. She is a rebel who always wants something more – ‘Arriving at that stage of enlightenment which feels that nothing is worthwhile, and filling up the spare hours of her existence by idealizing Wildevve for want of a better object’ (RN, p123). Regarding the nature of Eustacia, Hillis Miller’s comment is relevant:

She is obsessed with a foolish and unfulfillable desire to be somewhere else, somewhere different, especially Paris, though if she ever got there she would soon find it as unsatisfactory and boring as Egdon Heath.⁷

She is torn between her attention to Clym and her attention to Wildevve, and becomes fatally indecisive.

The issue of Eustacia’s love can be interpreted in terms of Rene’ Girard’s concept of desire. In his book *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1961), Girard identified a key-thematic structure of desire as ‘mimetic’ desire or ‘triangular’ desire. According to his theory we desire something or someone because we see that someone else desires that thing: ‘Triangular desire is the desire which transfigures its object’, and Girard calls it ‘metamorphosis of desire’⁸ The apparent perversity of the Eustacia and Wildevve relationship, in particular the episode in which she keeps a relationship with Wildevve after marriage with Clym, and Eustacia’s fascination with and aspiration for high society,--all these can be contextualized with this concept of desire. Eustacia desperately craves the dazzling delights of Parisian society. When she sees Clym labouring by cutting furze and sods like a common day labourer, then she decides to take leave of the world and seeks a refuge from her

troubles in a deed of desperation. She harbours many romantic illusions, like those of Emma Bovary in Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. Her passionate behaviour at this moment of emotional crisis can be analyzed in terms of Girard’s: ‘Desire is always spontaneous, it can always be portrayed by a simple straight line which join subject and object.’⁹ He also says: ‘The real criterion of spontaneous desire is the intensity of that desire. The strongest desires are the passionate desire.’¹⁰ Eustacia’s passion defines a desire according to another. This is because, she has been passionately attracted to Wildevve for a year, takes him as the only pleasure in her dull life in a part of the country she hates. Like Eustacia, Emma Bovary, a doctor’s wife, has adulterous affairs in order to escape the banalities and emptiness of provincial life. In an unsigned review in the *Athenaeum*, Eustacia is thus described: ‘Eustacia Vye belongs essentially to the class of which Madame Bovary is the type.’¹¹ The law of mediated desire exemplified by Eustacia in *the Return of the Native* can also be formulated for the character of Wildevve. Wildevve’s yearning for Eustacia just because she is marrying Clym exemplifies the structure of mediated or mimetic desire. It is well-expressed by the narrators comment, ‘The old longing for Eustacia had reappeared in his soul: and it was mainly because he had discovered that it was another man’s intention to possess her’ (RN, p264).

In this way fluctuating between the fulfilment and deceit of desire, Hardy’s Eustacia is conceived as a restless female self. Hardy’s method in building up the composite picture of Clym also differs perceptibly from Eustacia. Even though, each of them has desire for progress, yet Eustacia’s narrowly conceived idea of moving on can be contrasted with Clym’s genuine progressiveness. While Eustacia shows her craving for dazzles and delight and material pleasure, Clym has a genuine concern for teaching and education. Besides, Eustacia throughout the novel rebels against the cribbed existence that her marriage with Clym means for her. Thus, Hardy uses this flawed heroine to satirize the snobbery, particularly the hypocrisy and materialism of English society of the time.

If we accept Freud’s interpretation of the term ‘repetition’ as return to the origin or a ‘return’

of the repressed, it can take us both forward and backward in narrative.¹² In the narrative of *The Return of the Native*, 'repetition' stands as an 'initiatory desire'¹³ of the plot and it predominates to build up the 'detour', 'postponement' i.e. the middle part which is shaped by the interrelation of beginning and end.¹⁴ The beginning of *The Return of the Native* reflects the image of the timelessness that Hardy creates through the setting Egdon heath. It comes to life as Hardy shows us its furze and ferns, its hollows and lonely hills:

And to know that everything around and underneath had been from prehistoric times as unaltered as the stars overhead, gave ballast to the mind adrift on change, and harassed by the irrepressible New. The great inviolate place had an ancient permanence which the sea cannot claim. Who can say of a particular sea that it is Old? Distilled by the sun, kneaded by the moon, it is renewed in a year, in a day, or in an hour. The sea changed, the fields changed, the rivers, the villages, and the people changed, yet Egdon remained.(RN, p56)

Hardy creates this heath as functional setting, Egdon's centre is a hill known as Rainbarrow and the 'pale and axis of this heathery world' around which the crucial events of the novel revolve(RN, p55). Hardy places his heroine as 'queen of night' on its summit; here occurs the wonderful celebration of folk on Guy Fawkes Day; it is on Rainbarrow that Eustacia and Wildeve have their meetings. Eustacia signals to her lover with her bonfire across its empty miles; Mrs. Yeobright journeys across its burning face in August to be turned away by the closed door of Clym. It is the peculiar topography of Egdon heath to bring human lives together and separate them again:

Even night its Titanic form seemed to await something; but it had waited thus, unmoved, during so many centuries, through the crisis of so many things, that it could only be imagined to await one last crisis – the final overthrow.(RN, p54)

Thus, Hardy's characters move forward across the surface of the unchanging world of Egdon Heath. The specific detail of local life with their

mirth and merriment comes in the form of memory and continues to live in the heath and the heath also stands as a witness of it. In *The Return of the Native*, the local community always desires to live with the traditional world with its recurrent festivals. The recurrence of traditional festivals evokes a sense of fulfilment of their desires and they also effectively link up the present generation with the past. The fifth of November bonfires, derived from earlier Celtic and Teutonic festivals, give a beginning and end to the essential action of the novel. In 'The Custom of the Country', bonfire is commemorated and the character of Mrs. Yeobright is introduced. Again, it is a traditional May Day celebration around a flowered pale that precipitates the eventual marriage of Thomasin and Diggory Ven. Behind these celebrations survives an attitude which reinforces the sense of timelessness that the heath itself conveys.

The opening of the novel juxtaposes eternity and temporality. Although man has gradually emerged from 'Druidical rites and Saxon ceremonies' (RN, p67) into the nineteenth century, the heath remains the same, 'We seem to want the oldest and simplest human clothing where the clothing of the earth is so primitive' (RN, p56). The heath also helps to shape peoples' progress and destiny and desire. It provides a constant stable force against which these fluctuating lives can be shown in their true perspective. So, beyond its timelessness and primitiveness people living there always desire to move forward.

In *The Return of the Native*, desire stands as an 'embracing force.'¹⁵ The happy ending of this novel with the fulfilment of desire of the long-lasting and steady love of Diggory Venn in marriage with Thomasin Yeobright signifies the triumph of love over time.

Notes

¹ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Trans. Smith, Sheridan AM.(New York: Routledge,2002.)P 14.

² Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writing*, Trans. Reddick John, (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2003.) 82.

³ *ibid.*, p76

⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*. Trans. Sheridan, Alan (London: Tavistock, 1977)P 198.

⁵ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*,(London: Harvard UP,1984)P 105.

⁶ *ibid.*, P105.

⁷ J. Hillis Miller, *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire*, (London: Harvard University Press, 1980) P167.

⁸ René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, Trans. Yvonne Freccero, (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1965.) P17.

⁹ *ibid.* P2.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, P19.

¹¹ R. G. Cox (ed.), *Thomas Hardy: The Critical Heritage*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970) P56.

¹² Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writing*, Trans. Reddick John, (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2003.) p76.

¹³ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, (London: Harvard UP,1984) p48.

¹⁴ Gerald Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology*, (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1985.) p46.

¹⁵ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, (London: Harvard UP, 1984) p106.
