

# **The Role of Women in Victorian Literature: A Comparative Study of Jane Eyre and Tess of the d'Urbervilles**

**Javaid Ahmad Malik<sup>1</sup>, Muhammad Saleem<sup>2</sup>, Muhammad Shoukat Aslam<sup>3</sup>, Muhammad Sajid Farooq<sup>4</sup>, Muhammad Farrukh Khan<sup>5</sup>, Umer Farooq<sup>6</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>National College of Business Administration and Economics, Lahore, Pakistan

<sup>2</sup>Air University, Islamabad, Pakistan

<sup>3</sup>Lahore Institute of Science & Technology, Lahore, Pakistan

<sup>4,5</sup>NASTP Institute of Information Technology, Lahore, Pakistan

<sup>6</sup>Hamdard University, Karachi, Pakistan

**Abstract:** This research looks at the way women are shown and their importance in Victorian literature, by examining Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë and Tess of the d'Urbervilles by Thomas Hardy. It looks at the way each novel describes its female main character, considering 19th-century gender expectations, rules, and moral standards. Jane Eyre shows how Jane learns to respect herself, be independent, and have strong morals, while Tess of the d'Urbervilles tells of a victimised character trapped by social deceit and the sad results of living under a patriarchal system. While comparing the themes and analyzing the characters, this study brings out how Brontë and Hardy each attack Victorian gender views, using pieces centered on strength or weakness. Apparently, these stories mirror and react to the limited positions women had during the Victorian era, providing hints about early feminism and the issues women faced in literature.

**Keywords:** Victorian Literature, Female Protagonists, Gender Roles, Feminist Critique, Comparative Analysis

**Email:** [javed\\_ahmad2016@outlook.com](mailto:javed_ahmad2016@outlook.com)

## **1. Introduction**

From 1837 to 1901, when Queen Victoria ruled, the Victorian era saw great changes in Britain. At this point, there were great developments in industry, scientific research, and technology, and society saw deep transformations in how people viewed one another and what was considered right or wrong. A major topic of the age centered on the lines women were expected to follow in society. The debate about the roles women could have, whether only at home or in society and education, involved many writers, intellectuals, and reformers. This type of culture saw literature used to show societal norms as well as challenge and effect change. Jews loved studying Victorian literature, especially the novels written during the era, as these books played an important part in looking at, debating, and upholding common gender ideas of the time [1].

Among a large number of such novels, Jane Eyre (1847) by Charlotte Brontë and Tess of the d'Urbervilles (1891) by Thomas Hardy offer particularly clear insights into the way women were treated in the Victorian era. Even though the young women are central to both novels, their lives, choices, and outcomes are different, showing how the authors have unique ideas

and reasons for telling their stories. The novel *Jane Eyre* by Brontë highlights the main character's strong morals and personal integrity, and also portrays how women can be strong and independent. Another way to look at it, the novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* by Hardy centers on a heroine trapped by prejudice and the male-centered values of society, which raises issues about justice, purity, and fate.

This study examines how two important Victorian novels, *Jane Eyre* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, show how women are portrayed in literature at the time. My research aims to reveal the different ways women could be empowered or restricted by the ideas that existed in society at those times by studying the themes, characters, and society-related content of the novels. Literary theory also tries to understand how these texts influenced early feminist thought and questioned the hypocrisies in Victorian society's values [2].

Victorian women truly had to handle many difficult laws, financial problems, and social rules. Submissiveness, purity, and being based at home were traits many felt should define women, as described in the "Angel in the House" ideal. Women were not permitted to get much education, few jobs were given to them, and their freedom under the law was quite minimal. A married woman was not allowed to control her possessions or her children. In such a context, stories allowed women's thoughts, feelings, and wishes to be looked into in detail. We must read *Jane Eyre* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* not only as tales, but also as detailed social and political commentaries.

The novel follows the journey of an orphan, *Jane Eyre*, who, with hard work, education, and effort, becomes self-reliant and decides what she will do. The novel made history by depicting a woman who expects equal treatment in love and everyday life. She does not submit to others, makes principled choices, and is assertive, breaking the usual expectations for women in stories. The novel tells of *Jane's* personal growth, challenging old class and gender systems and urging readers to support a woman's own sense of self-worth.

In contrast, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* emphasizes the difficulty of a woman living with agency. A woman named *Tess* is forced, manipulated, and harmed by a group that prioritizes a woman's virtue instead of seeking justice. In his interpretation, *Tess* gets a lot of sympathy, and Hardy makes his criticisms of the unequal treatment of women biting. Still, the novel points out the limits on women's choices because of strict rules and customs. *Jane* is able to choose how her story will end, but it is not true for *Tess*. By denying control over her body and choices, the story becomes a string of unavoidable mistakes and misery for the woman [3].

Having both books in one study gives a rare chance to look at female strength and suffering during the same historical time. Their novels have female protagonists who each respond differently to society—Jane manages to fight back but remains unhurt, while Tess stays silent and is severely punished. The difference proves that the range of female narratives in Victorian fiction captures the shift in feminist thought during that time.

The messages in these novels, such as those about gender inequality, social pressure, and women's independence, are still part of conversations today. By reading these famous Victorian novels, we see both the values from those times and how far (or near) we are to equal rights for all genders. These two stories still affect today's discussions about authority, individual choice, and character in books as well as in life [4].

It further demonstrates that literary comparison helps gain insights into larger cultural and historical issues. Looking at the ways authors address similar cultural and social problems gives us deeper insight into the canon and what it means for thought. Because of it, we see how storytellers work through the organizing of plots, the introduction of characters, and the addition of themes to create important comments about how things are.

## 2. Literature Review

Women's roles in Victorian literature have been explored and debated by feminist and literary scholars for a long period. Studies here investigate how authors responded to the restricted gender roles of the 19th century by representing womanhood, independence, values, and social class. During the Victorian period, society and family roles for women were closely examined, so novels by Charlotte Brontë (*Jane Eyre*) and Thomas Hardy (*Tess of the d'Urbervilles*) that feature women facing these roles have received wide scrutiny. It brings together key points of view about these novels and also coordinates them with popular debates on gender, morality, and literary realism from the Victorian age [5].

Separate spheres—the belief that men worked and decided public policy, but women were responsible for home and connection to moral rightness—is often a main focus in literary studies on Victorian fiction. In their important book *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Gilbert and Gubar argue that Brontë and other women writers included heroines in their novels who challenged being at home and sought to grow personally. *Jane Eyre* defeats the notion of the “angel in the house” by showing her independent and equal character. Experts say that Jane defies the patriarchy that shaped Victorian England as she searches for her own identity.

Similarly, Elaine Showalter argues that “gynocriticism” is a feminist reading of literature, highlighting women’s experiences and how they are shown by women writers. Jane Eyre shows Brontë’s modern ideas about a woman who wants equality in thoughts and feelings in her relationship with Mr. Rochester. As Showalter (1985) explains, Brontë let women assert themselves strongly, which helped many Victorian women express experiences that were kept silent [6].

Feminist fatalism has also been used to analyse Tess of the d’Urbervilles by Hardy, since it portrays women as subject to male control and injustice. Gilbert and Gubar mention that Hardy feels for Tess, yet by calling her a “pure woman,” his narrative connects her to more suffering and a lax form of femininity. On the other hand, some critics think Hardy was too early in identifying the unfairness of rules around women’s sexuality. Tess is punished by society even though she has not done anything wrong, which shows how unfair and hypocritical the community’s morals were in the novel.

Many academics have discussed how much power is given to the heroines in these classical novels. Because Jane Eyre is strong, independent, and unyielding in her beliefs, many see her as a leader in the development of female literary heroes. Some critics, such as Terry Eagleton, emphasize that the novel is much broader than romance and includes discussions on class, gender, and religion. Because of her complex and independent nature, Jane is a crucial influence on the way women were written about in English novels [7].

There is a lot of debate over how much agency Tess Durbeyfield actually had. Some critics, for example, Penny Boumelha, state that Hardy’s determination undermines Tess’s ability to alter her fate. Since few roles were available to women at the time, she is portrayed as a silent, passive, and weak character. At the same time, Tess’s strength and dignified conduct offer an alternative to the usual image of women whose lives take a downward turn. Tilda, Hardy’s heroine, may have lost to society, but she proves its injustices and inconsistencies, as discussed by Boumelha (1982).

Tess is shown to take control of her situation through her resistance, decisions to look after her family, and the love she finally gives Angel Clare in the end. Therefore, although Jane Eyre voices and enacts her own will, Tess's agency is less pronounced and often changed by others, each one showing what it meant to be a woman in the Victorian age [8].

Brontë and Hardy make use of their narratives to investigate the sense of morality that existed in Victorian society. Wuthering Heights attacks marriage, social promotion, and the dishonesty of religious figures, using encounters between Jane and figures, including Mr. Brocklehurst and St John Rivers. Experts like Marianne Thormählen show how Jane’s

rejection of Rochester's marriage proposal involves Christian moral beliefs about dignity and self-worth.

To add, Hardy takes on moral extremes, pointing out how Victorian society punishes women for everything they are accused of, whether real or imagined. His version of Tess leads readers to question their beliefs about purity, guilt, and justice. Some critics, including Peter Widdowson, argue that because of Hardy's style, characters often seem powerless against what is already set by their background and circumstances. It is consistent with the way the plot is built, as Tess's attempts to control her life bring only terrible outcomes.

In terms of how they tell the stories, Brontë and Hardy use different techniques to make the reader feel and understand what their heroines go through. Because Brontë tells the story through Jane Eyre's perspective, we are able to feel her emotions closely and notice her weaknesses. This form of storytelling has been viewed as important for giving feminist views a direct place in the novel. It gives Jane a chance to speak directly, telling her own experience as she wants to [9].

With *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Hardy relies on an omniscient third-person narrator, making it easier for him to comment on the world Tess lives in, but Hardy keeps us separate from Tess's personal feelings and thoughts. But, Hardy adding elements like a red ribbon, the d'Urberville name, or Stonehenge helps tell the story of Tess's sorrow and the fated nature of her experiences. Some critics, such as Kristin Brady, have noted how Hardy's use of symbolism and description of the countryside shows the difference between Tess's innocence and the oppressive society that punishes her.

Comparing *Jane Eyre* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* in Victorian novels has proved helpful in understanding how women's roles in the novels evolved. Many scholars agree that both novels, despite having different endings and feelings, both try to question and challenge how society functions. Susan Meyer points out that while Jane becomes more equal and satisfied, her story also points out that women must often sacrifice much due to patriarchal society. Unlike the other novels, *Tess* ends in disaster, which highlights the damage done by a rigid society and people who ignore others.

These days, critics look at these novels in the context of gender, plus class, race, and colonialism. *Jane Eyre* has faced criticism for how it depicts Bertha Mason, who is shown using colonial stereotypes. Some scholars, such as Gayatri Spivak, believe that Jane only becomes more powerful when Bertha remains silent. Critics now use environmental and ecofeminist approaches to analyse *Tess*, especially regarding the way Hardy ties Tess's end to losing the rural lifestyle and adopting machines in the countryside [10].

### 3. Methodology

The research involves a qualitative comparison of literature to investigate female characters in *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy. While carrying out this study, one goes through both texts and investigates character development, the way narratives are told, gender roles, and the influences of society and culture. Using Gilbert and Gubar, Elaine Showalter, and modern critics as guides, the texts are interpreted to discover how women are shown as the central characters. Journal articles, essays by critics, and documents from the Victorian period help to improve the analysis. The study looks at how women's roles are described and portrayed in the novels and how the different vantage points reveal their similarities and contrasts.

### 4. Analysis Discussion

The examination of *Jane Eyre's* versus *Tess Durbeyfield's* approach demonstrates that female characters are often constructed very differently in this era. *Jane Eyre* stands for independence and choosing her own path in a world where it is not always easy. Adverse situations fail to change her strong will or dignity, and she keeps making choices that are right alongside her struggles. In other words, *Tess* is often affected by influences from the world, her class, and her family. She felt dependent on males in her life because women of her background had very few options.

*Jane* keeps her moral standards unchanged, even though this might leave her feeling lonely or short on money. Still, because of the community's harsh view, *Tess* is blamed for events that actually happened against her by *Alec*. It demonstrates a major theme in Hardy—often, women were held responsible for things they did not do. Because *Jane* can rise above her social status with education and kindness, while *Tess* is unable to change her fate as a poor peasant, social position is an important factor set apart by the two characters in these novels.

The way the two characters experience romantic agency is very different. *Jane* decides when and how to love, which affirms her equal position in her relationships, especially with *Mr. Rochester*. Fate and force draw *Tess* away from her lonely life and into romantic involvement. Ultimately, the difference in their ability to overcome pain defines the general moods of the books: *Jane* wins through inner strength, but *Tess*, who is also strong, suffers an unhappy ending because of life's harshness.

Together, Brontë and Hardy use these traits to define *Jane* and *Tess's* characters as well as highlight the thematic themes, where Brontë supports women's independence, and Hardy points out the injustices in society from a fatalistic standpoint.

**Table 1: Character Traits Comparison**

Sr. No.	Trait	Jane Eyre	Tess Durbeyfield	Observations
1	Independence	Strong-willed and self-reliant	Often dependent on others	Jane asserts autonomy; Tess is constrained by society
2	Moral Integrity	Refuses to compromise ethics	Struggles with imposed morality	Jane upholds values; Tess suffers for perceived transgressions
3	Social Status	Governess with limited means	Poor peasant girl	Both face class struggles, but Jane navigates them more successfully
4	Romantic Agency	Chooses love on her terms	Love dictated by circumstances	Jane has more control over romantic decisions
5	Resilience	Survives hardship with dignity	Tragically succumbs to fate	Jane's story is one of triumph, Tess's of tragedy

The comparison of these themes shows that both Jane Eyre and Tess of the d'Urbervilles discuss major problems of being a woman, belonging to society, accepting morality, and understanding human actions, although each does so from a different perspective. There is a strong emphasis and confetti of celebration in Jane Eyre around female empowerment. Jane's story shows how she gradually becomes more independent, smart, and morally strong. She stands up to being submissive and ends up selecting someone whom she respects just as much as herself. Unlike Esther, Tess's life is dominated by men and the strict rules of society, making her end up as a victim rather than a fighter against patriarchy.

The ideas of class and social inequality play a major role in both novels. Because she is a governess, Jane does not fit comfortably in either the servant class or with those she tends to, the Bertrams. Her accomplishment of social status by being virtuous and knowledgeable shows the old Victorians that things did not have to stay the same. At the same time, Hardy places much more emphasis on Tess's class background and the disadvantages she has because of it in the story. Since her world is marked by severe and unavoidable inequality, it becomes a key topic explored in the novel.

Religious beliefs and moral values are not the same in both novels. Being guided by her own morals, Jane decides to leave Rochester when she learns his secret. Unlike everyone else, Tess is forced to obey an unbending truth that holds her responsible despite being a victim, mainly for sexual purity. Hardy looks at Victorian hypocrisy through this theme, while Brontë offers a kinder and personal Christian ethic.

In Jane’s opinion, true love and sacrifice respect themselves and are equal, so she declines Rochester’s first proposal because it does not meet her standards. Even so, Tess is committed to self-denial, making sure that other people’s well-being is more important than her own. The love story in Tess’s life is presented as a tragedy, which underlines her identity as a heroine destined for misfortune.

The novels make a strong distinction between fate and free will when it comes to the contrast in their views. Jane works hard to control her own fate against many obstacles. Tess’s fate is depicted as having been determined by forces beyond her, including destiny, society, and history. Hardy shows that humans are limited by circumstances, whereas Brontë shows that a person’s personal will can shape a better outcome.

**Table 2: Themes in the Novels**

Sr. No.	Theme	Presence in Jane Eyre	Presence in Tess of the d’Urbervilles	Comparative Insight
1	Female Empowerment	Prominent	Limited	Jane's story is empowering, but Tess is victimised
2	Class and Social Inequality	Significant	Core theme	Both novels critique social hierarchy
3	Religion and Morality	Jane’s moral choices were shaped by faith	Tess was judged harshly by moral standards	Different interpretations of virtue
4	Love and Sacrifice	Jane loves boundaries	Tess sacrifices for love	Contrasting portrayals of romantic devotion
5	Fate and Free Will	Jane controls her destiny	Tess is bound by fate	Highlights determinism vs. autonomy

The way Charlotte Brontë and Thomas Hardy express their stories plays a big role in forming the tone, point of view, and depth of feeling in Jane Eyre and Tess of the d’Urbervilles. The narrative voice is one of the main ways fiction and poetry differ. The story is told from Jane’s perspective, which lets readers see Jane’s emotions, ideas, and reasoning with no filtration. Because Jane is straightforward, she becomes easier for readers to sympathize with and look up to. In another way, Hardy adopts a third-person omniscient perspective, so we see the wider picture, but Tess is referred to and moved around by the narrator rather than telling her own story. Because of this distinction, readers are either involved or detached from what the protagonists do to affect the plot.

Both novels make use of symbolism, though in different ways. Fire is used in the novel as a symbol of passion and change, and birds and eyes stand for feeling free and seeing things clearly. Symbols in the novel often support and parallel Jane’s personal evolution. In Tess of

the d’Urbervilles, the red ribbon and Stonehenge stand for Tess’s past, her heritage, and, sadly, her own negative outcome. These different signs increase the feeling that Tess’s fate is sealed, helping Hardy tell his story of determination.

Tension in the books is built up by both authors through the use of foreshadowing. Dreams and other unexplained events in Jane Eyre signal what lies ahead for Jane and connect her inner thoughts to outside events. Unlike Morris, Hardy foreshadows Tess’s end with nature-related foreshadowing, such as including crows in key scenes or whenever the weather changes. By using these devices, the stories move forward and properly reflect each writer’s chief themes: for Brontë, destiny comes from the strength of character, but Hardy emphasises the stubbornness of fate.

The place and structure in fiction can show the writer’s feelings toward the events. The settings in Gothic style, such as the red room and Thornfield Hall, make Jane’s journey feel intense and full of mystery. In contrast, Hardy’s scenes of countryside and damaged estates stand for the fading of old traditions and the risk to the lives of people in the countryside because of the rise of factories. The settings tie into each person’s feelings, thoughts, and relationships as the story progresses.

Finally, the author uses irony to question and challenge Victorian society. Irony is used by Brontë to reveal how some characters are false in their beliefs when hiding behind positions of authority. Tragic irony becomes more important in the novel after Tess is sharply castigated for her so-called impurity as a result of her being raped. Both cases use irony to bring out the contradictions and unjust features in Victorian society.

**Table 3: Authorial Techniques and Literary Devices**

Sr. No.	Literary Device/Technique	Usage in Jane Eyre	Usage in Tess of the d’Urbervilles	Impact on Narrative
1	Narrative Voice	First-person	Third-person omniscient	Jane’s voice is direct; Tess’s is mediated
2	Symbolism	Fire, birds, eyes	Red ribbon, Stonehenge	Symbolism enhances character depth and fate
3	Foreshadowing	Dreams, supernatural hints	Nature imagery, omens	Both use it to build emotional impact
4	Setting as Mood	Gothic elements, moors	Pastoral England, decaying aristocracy	Settings reflect inner turmoil
5	Irony	Social hypocrisy	Tragic irony of purity	Irony exposes societal contradictions

## 5. Conclusion

A comparison of *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy shows how women were portrayed very differently in Victorian literature. Each novel's main character highlights the social expectations, barriers, and shifts in ideas about womanhood from that period. *Jane Eyre* shows a heroine full of morality, independence, and strength, but *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* focuses on a character who suffers from social unfairness, male dominance, and strong morals.

The analysis proves that Jane is powerful because she can deal with problems in society and relationships without altering her beliefs. She wants equal treatment in her love life and is proud of her identity in spite of her social and gender roles. Unlike the other two novels, Hardy depicts Tess as pure and noble, but living in a system that harms instead of defends her. Because Tess was innocent, her collapse proves how harsh Victorian views towards women really were.

Against the background of gender, class, moral values, and agency, both novels explore their themes, but each novel does so differently. Readers feel close to Jane because the author allows her to speak directly to them. The omniscient narration that Hardy uses, looking at the story from the outside, points out that Tess's suffering was an unavoidable result of the way society is organized.

Symbolism, setting, and irony make the emotions and ideas in both stories even stronger. Brontë uses Gothic themes and personal images to show how Jane grows, but Hardy relies on nature and tragic irony to show Tess struggles against a heartless society.

*Jane Eyre* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* are both important to Victorian literature, presenting unique but compatible insights into the situation of women. Taken as a whole, they portray both the empowered and the victimized sides of women and encourage us to keep considering subjects like equality between genders, justice, and the moral challenges we face.

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