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## What went Wrong with the Noble Burden of Clym Yeobright?

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### Abstract

Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* is a novel that exposes the differences between the ideal and the real through the intellectualism of the character, Clym Yeobright. Owing to his love for Egdon Heath and its inhabitants, he returns and decides to teach his people the ways of stepping out from indifference to the path of enlightenment. However, it is the indifference of the villagers to the notion of change as well as Clym's changed self despite his best efforts to shed off his Parisian past which add to conflict and eventually the failure of his plan. Despite being a native of the heath, he is unable to realise the inflexibility of the mass. Clym's mission of imposing new ideas for a brighter future, therefore, meets with scepticism which confirms his status of an outsider as viewed by the inhabitants. The paper would make an attempt to see such clash of perspectives as symbols of the Orient and the Occident. It also questions the motive of Clym, whether his burden of nobility is the one that possesses an individual upliftment with the upliftment of the collective or that which promises to find purpose by spreading knowledge. His decision not only strains his personal relations with his wife and mother but the community as well. The paper seeks to employ Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony.

**Keywords:** Hegemony, ideal, Occident, Orient, real

### Introduction

"It showed the barrow to be the segment of a globe, as perfect as on the day when it was thrown up, even the little ditch remaining from which the earth was dug. Not a plough had ever disturbed a grain of that stubborn soil" (Hardy, 1999). Clym Yeobright is synonymous to the title of Hardy's novel, *The Return of the Native*. He is the native of the



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rustic Egdon Heath who returns to his birthplace from Paris. Viewing his jewellery business as one too effeminate for his manly self, the idealistic Clym sets his heart to be a reason for the upliftment of his people, educating them through his newfound ideals and believes. Hardy's depiction of such a chivalrous decision of his protagonist puzzles Eustacia Vye, an inhabitant of the heath. She is the one who desires to flee from Egdon and be a part of the posh lifestyle of Paris instead. Such conflicting ideas are still at par with the contemporary times when people marvel upon the return of an individual who leaves the comforts of city to his roots to share his perspectives hence, educating all.

A native to the arid and aimless Egdon Heath, Clym's fame outreaches his means. He is an individual amidst all people, the one gifted with the sense of idea and independence and a human who possesses the urge to study, know more, and disseminate it among others. Despite being a native, he has always been an alien that others revere from a distance and have high hopes for. This serves to be an ideal instance for Said's notion of worshipping the West. Hardy writes,

"By the time he reached twelve he had in this manner been heard of as artist and scholar for at least two miles round. An individual whose fame spreads three or four thousand yards in the time taken by the fame of others similarly situated to travel six or eight hundred, must of necessity have something in him. Possibly Clym's fame, like Homer's, owed something to the accidents of his situation; nevertheless, famous he was." (Hardy, 1999).

This paper attempts to look at Clym's efforts to make use of his return and redress Egdon Heath in the guise of Paris, a symbol of advancement and modernity, and the reasons he fails to do so. It would endeavour to focus on his ideologies which bring about the differences between his idealism and the eventual disillusionment which entail. For the purpose of the study, therefore, it seeks to investigate through the lens of Gramscian hegemony as well as draws a comparative analysis between Clym Yeobright and Narendra Mukherjee, a character from the novel, *Datta*, by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay.

### **HEGEMONY OF THE PROLETARIAT**

The very fact that Clym acknowledges that he needs to study in order to be qualified for the position of a school teacher before opening the school is noteworthy. His love and recognition for Egdon Heath is so great that he wants to do something that would benefit it. But his way of showing his love takes quite a turn (Meng-ying, 2022). He singles himself out to be a teacher without doubt. However, it should be noted that the paper is not only limited to the discussion of cultural hegemony in the context of Clym's schooling the rustics of Egdon Heath but also the merciless domination of the heath itself. From Clym being described as its 'product', Eustacia portrayed as 'raw' to Diggory Venn painted in 'red', it is the oriental



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Egdon Heath which does not tolerate and crumples any possibility of occidental disruption which it could possibly perceive. Herein lies the otherwise silent hegemony of the heath which demands its children to be loyal and meek to its soil without which the inhabitants are victimised by its ultimate ruthless vengeance; blindness for Clym and a supposed suicide for Eustacia. This stance could be justified by comparing the Occidental land with the kind and forgiving Christ and the Oriental heath with the intimidating and wrathful pagan gods. Clym's failure in schooling and transforming Egdon Heath into a knowledgeable space is primarily what Gramsci would refer to as hegemony of the working class over the capitalist state. Hardy portrays it by choosing terms like, "bossy", "lofty", a "bulk" all of which encompass greatness,

"It was a barrow. This bossy projection of earth above its natural level occupied the loftiest ground of the loneliest height that the heath contained. Although from the vale it appeared but as a wart on an Atlantean brow, its actual bulk was great. It formed the pole and axis of this heathery world" (Hardy, 1999).

Clym is the one of whom "something was expected". This something does not mediate to the success that the inhabitants of the heath think of but that which Clym has been yearning for. He is not the only one to impose ideas of his choice on the others as he becomes a victim of the inhabitants' ideas and expectations as well. Clym's hegemonic rule is overturned once their initial regard and expectation for him wear out and they refuse to accept themselves as his inferiors or see the world through his eyes.

### **IDEOLOGY WITHOUT EQUILIBRIUM**

This element of schooling the ignorant follows the route of Edward Said's seminal work, *Orientalism* where Said advocates the unending battle between the Occidents or the self labelled superior race and the Orients or those desperately in need of being saved from the perils of the Occidents' notion of uncouth (Said, 1979). From the former, being aware of their superior selves imposing their ideals, principles and believes on the subalterns, to the latter identifying themselves from the gaze of their rulers, *Orientalism* lays bare the vast realm of constructed image that had been created to justify the role of the West. However, one question seems to hover still, "How does the concept of power operate so successfully?" For Antonio Gramsci, the man behind Said's influence, this concept of work is based on 'Dominio' (or coercion) and 'Direzione' (or consensus) (Gramsci, 1999). If consensus rests at the level of civil society, it must be won there while coercion rests at the level of the state or "political society" to be precise. Marked by the predominance of consensus over coercion, hegemonic rule, therefore, represents a balance. This is something that Clym, the dominant power, fails to win over "his kind", the Egdon natives or the subalterns, whose consensus falls



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short to Clym's thoughtless imperialism of coerciveness through the means of spreading rudimentary knowledge for moral and intellectual improvement, only to move on to wider plans of the school, which, in other words, is a capitalist move (Gramsci, 1999).

It is Mrs. Yeobright's reluctance in allowing her affluent son, Clym, get married to Eustacia, "a heath girl without a penny" where Gramsci's theory of class power comes to the fore. To her, a French woman would be better suited off than one without a name or family legacy. One notes the inevitable difference between the two classes in terms of varying ideologies, Clym from the capitalist class while Eustacia representing the working class. As Valeriano Ramos, Jr. observes, "This conception of ideology and revolution was often combined with a reductionist interpretation of ideology which argued that ideologies necessarily had a class character, so that there was an ideology of the capitalist class and an ideology of the working class, both ideologies antagonistic, defined, and mutually exclusive in their totality" (Valeriano, 1982). It is owing to an absence in equilibrium and presence of resistance in the garb of liberal thinking that Mrs. Yeobright, a mother of a promising capitalist son, feels wronged, and her sophistication and status affected. Families, microsystems of civil society as they are, being influenced by the hegemonic class that held state power, practiced supremacy over the other subordinate classes (Valeriano, 1982). In Mrs. Yeobright's eyes, therefore, Eustacia Vye is merely a wasted beauty without fortune whose charms should not stand in the way of Clym's unending possibilities.

### **CLYM YEOBRIGHT AND NARENDRA MUKHERJEE**

Although teaching the poor is a commendable decision yet Clym expects the inhabitants of Egdon to view the world through his eyes. This could well be paralleled with Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel, *Datta*, where the male lead, Narendra Mukherjee, also teaches the villagers of his hometown (Chattopadhyay, 2021). After having completed his medical school, Narendra, a young doctor, comes back from England to his village, the rural Dighra. He is described as a destitute who, in spite of being a doctor, does not practice because of leaving a lasting impression in the society that would benefit the medical sciences, which later proves to be a microscope. Regardless of his financial condition, Narendra teaches the local villagers the modern and efficient farming techniques without charging a penny from his students. It is in terms of the aim of lending a hand to the oblivious and returning to their roots that both the characters, Clym and Narendra, converge. However, Narendra's plan seems to be more strategic and well executed as he involves the males aged from fifteen to sixty to thrive in their professional lives instead of Clym's more idealistic view of improving the class at the expense of the individual than the other way round. It is owing to this discrepancy in the characters that both are different.



Clym Yeobright, the bright persona of Egdon Heath, distances himself from the uncouth rustic lifestyle whereas Narendra mingles with all in spite of himself and fights for their traditional and religious cause. This goes much against the now rational and reasonable Clym's views who desires to uproot the orthodox and traditional believes of the people all at once. His coming to Egdon has little to do with his transformed self as he overlooks the emotions of the local people that are embedded in their age old traditions, and thrusts upon them the treachery of civilisation, something that goes much against what Narendra does. A Brahmo zamindar's decision of banning an old festival concerning idol worship is protested by Narendra as he tries to make them realise how unjust it would be to be intolerant to others' believes. He justifies this by stating that believes, if they prove to be harmless in every way to the progress of the society should little be toyed as all do not end up as superstitions. It is this difference that Clym fails to note in his aim to achieve something greater.

### **CLYM YEOBRIGHT: A LIBERAL MIND TRAPPED IN THE CONSERVATIVE TERRAINS**

One finds glimpses of Jude Fawley from *Jude the Obscure* in Clym Yeobright as both are romantic intellectuals presiding as rulers in their individual realms only to be torn miles apart by the harsh practicalities of life. Their misfortune, therefore, is in studying and avoiding the realities of the society. From superstition being a norm in Egdon Heath where people love to fantasise about spirits to entertain their weary lives to Eustacia being labelled as a witch and pricked by Susan Nunsuch, Clym is aghast to witness matters which makes it all the more important for him to be lead the way. On the other hand, Jude sees no profanity in supporting Sue's views of them living together with their children without being married (Hardy, 2003). However, fate in the guise of Egdon and Wessex, strikes their now turned 'sacrilegious' natives for striving to bring liberalism in where conservatism has the last say.

"The heath down there was now a vast abyss, and no longer a continuation of what they stood on; for their eyes, adapted to the blaze, could see nothing of the deeps beyond its influence." (Hardy, 1999).

The heath, with its pagan practices and beliefs, is a representation of a past that is vehemently resistant to any kind of human intervention that comes in its way (Rajak, 2024). Those who mirror its gloom and rural past are the ones who survive in the heath. Perhaps the only character who embodies it the most is Diggory Venn, the reddleman. His patience in his largely solitary existence, mastering his dying occupation, symbolises the otherwise dying traditions that the heath upholds with the utmost serenity. Being the living personification of the heath, he happens to be its eyes and ears watching over the others for the interests of some (Henneman, n.d.). This helps the heath restore the law and order in its own way by firmly



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grasping those who dare to rebel against it. It is evident, therefore, that those with ambitions and expectations surpassing the Egdon Heath, is stifled to silence in an urge to accept the circumstances they have been born into. It is due to Clym's intolerance for the ways of heath, however superstitious, which mars his love and devotion for it leading to his perpetual doom. His declining eyesight forces him to forsake his mission of teaching and become a furze cutter, a job that blends him to the Egdon inhabitants.

Clym is a modern figure fed by Parisian intellect trapped in the sensational Egdon nostalgia. His troubled stance lies in a sheer lack of belonging, hence the introduction of school. Furthermore, steeped in traditions and customs, the whole of Egdon Heath appears to bind Clym by stability through familiarity including Mrs. Yeobright, his mother. A yet another characteristic of a drowsy place, the people gossip and find both leisure and community in taking a peep into others' lives according to their notions,

"That lad ought never to have left home. His father's occupation would have suited him best, and the boy should have followed on. I don't believe in these new moves in families. My father was a sailor, so was I, and so should my son have been if I had had one." (Hardy, 1999).

### CLYM'S TRAGEDY

As is evident from the novel, Clym Yeobright happens to be under the impression that knowledge should be spread among the rustic men of Egdon Heath and this is what he considers as the central point. However, Eustacia Vye and Mrs. Yeobright see the world as otherwise which have been inviting negative criticism ever since. Despite considering himself to be a noble and experienced individual who needs to preach his kind, it is none but himself who should attempt to acknowledge the worldviews of the others before attempting to uplift the society. Considering Derrida's binary opposition, Clym is the character who wants to bring about positivity. He is the harbinger of knowledge who had selflessly left the affluence of Paris to the idle and somnolent Egdon Heath while Eustacia Vye serves to be the primary instance of who one should not aspire to be. She is pronounced a selfish figure who attempts to advise her husband against opening a school at Egdon and escaping to Paris for a better lifestyle. And to justify the aforementioned observation, Derrida's theory coincides with Hardy's denial of allowing Clym be a well-proportioned mind as, "A well proportioned mind is one which shows no particular bias;..." and Clym's does just the same (Hardy, 1999).

The *Return of the Native* is not without its share of tragic possibilities. One notes the indispensable trio of character, deed, and catastrophe, as stated by Bradley even while studying Eustacia Vye (Bradley, 1991). The chained reasoning of her possible avoidance of death could be traced back to the point had she been content with her life in Egdon Heath and accept her love like any other Victorian woman. Her actions, to a certain extent, rub off her





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existence. She darts off as Clym refuses to leave Egdon and head for Paris and gradually inclines to Wildeva with a conflicted mind. One sees through Eustacia's spiritual force as her long standing individualism generates strife with the Victorian notion of an ideal married woman.

One of the convincing reasons behind Clym's unhappiness could be traced in his schemes that he planned of parallel executions without realising the dreams of Eustacia or Mrs. Yeobright. From marrying the destitute heath girl, looking after his mother, to educating his kind, never to return Paris, Clym's failure marks an absence in deference, desiring to avoid the gradual escape of time and perfect his life in vain.

### **CONCLUSION**

"This was the obscure, removed spot to which was about to return a man whose latter life had been passed in the French capital—the centre and vortex of the fashionable world" (Hardy, 1999).

A term that the Occidentals used for their Oriental counterparts in the most derogatory sense possible, 'native' connotes a lingering obsessive layer that a 'spot' has on its inhabitant. This is precisely why Clement Yeobright is the affectionate 'Clym' to the heath at large. Despite the irrefutable presence of Gramsci's cultural hegemony where Clym tries to play a dominant role over his apparently subaltern group of heath men and women, he emanates reflections of Oedipus' helpless efforts in escaping fate (Sophocles, 1984). Neither are granted free will. Moreover, Clym's doom lies in Gramsci's "predominance obtained by consent" and a persistent contradiction of his Self with the Egdon Heath as the Other (Gramsci, 1999).

"Immobility being the chief characteristic of that whole which the person formed portion of, the discontinuance of immobility in any quarter suggested confusion." (Hardy, 1999).

Clym appears to be an ignorant figure himself, choosing to ignore and disregard the warnings of his mother as well as avoid respecting and recognising the pleas of his wife. It is, therefore, he, whose actions prioritise his choices which are self-centered for the purpose of the noble pursuits which bring him tragic consequences. Clym's noble and enlightening plan of spreading knowledge fails to please not only his wife, mother, and the heath folk and but also bring contentment in his own life he thought it would as a way of escaping the "false and effeminate" lifestyle of Paris.

Clym Yeobright being this confusion for having disturbed an otherwise stillness is the native held accountable for his downright ungratefulness by desiring to uproot at once the existing to start anew, hence the 'curse' of the arid yet bountiful heath.

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