



Rational Choice Theory: An Economic Analysis of Hardy's The Return of the Native



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Abstract *Rational Choice Theory is a fundamental theory of economics deals with the behavior of an individual in which an actor chooses an action rationally in order to minimize costs and maximize benefits. Several studies have been accomplished on RTC in the frame of reference to the law, criminology, sociology, etc., but only in a small number of researches, RCT has been applied to literature. A realistic piece of literature demands a rational-choice explanation, but the novels of Hardy-'historian of Wessex' have not yet been studied from the perspective of an economic theory, RCT. The purpose of the present study is to widen the compass of RCT and to produce the plurality of meaning of Hardy's The Return of the Native. Employing the method of textual analysis, the present qualitative study explored: i. reflection of RCT in individual actors,' i.e., Eustacia and Wildeve's preference to their available choices; ii. Eustacia's economic and Clym's unprofitable interest in life from the perspective of RCT; iii. reflection of Offender's Rational Choice Theory in the actions of Eustacia, Wildeve, and Diggory from The Return.*

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Introduction

During the last few decades, economic theories and their application have come under the compass of literary criticism because there is a long-lasting relationship between art and society. According to [Scott \(1962\)](#), art is not created in a vacuum, but an author is answering to a community to which he is an important part. There is a dialectical relationship between economics and literature, but different critics have

ambivalent tolerance towards cross-disciplinary work. Literature determines economic theories. In the same way, different economic theories determine literature. Literature has been used for promoting and rejecting different economic systems and theories: Miller and O'Neill expose the ugly face of capitalism in their plays, i.e., *Death of a Salesman* and *The Hairy Ape*, respectively. The works of Swift, Dequincy, Southey,

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Coleridge, Carlyle, Peacock, Ruskin, Dickens etc., have played a significant role in the history of economic thought ([Grampp, 1973](#)). Theories of economics i.e. monopoly of power, class struggle, tax compliance theory, etc., have been applied to literature. Still, Rational Choice Theory has not yet been applied to any piece of literature that this study intends to highlight under an economic lens.

In order to bring the often neglected and marginalized area of studying Rational Choice Theory from the perspective of literature into the center, Thomas Hardy's novel *The Return of the Native* is needed to be analyzed in the paradigm of this theory of economics. The significance of this study lies in the fact that firstly, it will widen the scope of Rational Choice Theory, and secondly, it will produce a plurality of meaning by opening an economic study of Hardy's novels.

Investigating the relationship between Rational Choice Theory and Hardy's realistic fiction *The Return of the Native* is justified because, as per Elster, RCT can be applied to real literature. According to him, "a successful work of art is one that can be given a rational-choice explanation" ([Elster, 2007, p.246](#)). Likewise RCT, realism is the hallmark of Hardy's novels. According to ([Barrie, 1889, p. 57](#)) Hardy is a "historian of Wessex". Thus, there is a relationship between RCT and realistic literature. The present study will open up new horizons of knowledge in the realm of economics and literature and also open the gate of interdisciplinary research.

Objectives of this study are:

- To wed the dully factual theories of economics i.e. Rational Choice Theory with the aesthetic pleasure of literature;
- To blur the boundaries between economics and literature in order to

develop an interdisciplinary approach;

- To widen the compass of Rational Choice Theory and analysis of Hardy's novels, especially *The Return of the Native*, in order to produce a plurality of meaning.

This study attempts to answer the following Research Questions:

- How do the decisions of the individual actors, i.e., Eustacia's preference to the available choices, show the function of Rational Choice Theory?
- How Eustacia and Clym have economic and unprofitable interests in life, respectively, from the perspective of Rational Choice Theory?
- How Offender's Rational Choice Theory is reflected in the actions of Eustacia, Wildeve, and Diggory Venn?

Literature Review

Several scholarly articles have been conducted on Rational Choice Theory and its application in law, criminology, and sociology ([Akers, 1990](#); [Monroe & Kreidie, 1997](#); [Lovett, 2006](#); [Gul, 2009](#); [Kroneberg & Kalter, 2012](#)) and somewhat less research on Rational Choice Theory in literature ([Kilbourne, 1990](#)). Several studies have been accomplished on Hardy's *The Return of the Native* ([Bjork, 1974](#); [Mickelson, 1974](#); [O'hara, 1997](#); [Ford, 2005](#); [Burger, 2009](#); [Ramel, 2010](#)), but this study has concentrated on an economic analysis of Thomas Hardy's novel *The Return* that has not yet been explored from this perspective.

Myriad research scholars all over the world applied Rational Choice Theory in different areas of criminology, sociology, economics, etc. [Akers \(1990\)](#) applied the

notions of Deterrence and Rational Choice Theory to criminology in the frame of reference to social learning theory. [Monroe and Kreidie \(1997\)](#) explored the failure to understand Islamic fundamentalism from the perspective of RCT and sought out that Islam dictated all fundamental issues and provided the basis for daily living. [Lovett \(2006\)](#) studied Rational Choice Theory from the perspective of developing explanations of social phenomena. [Gul \(2009\)](#) emphasized how models of RCT applied to criminal justice. [Kroneberg and Kalter \(2012\)](#) investigated the application of empirical methods to RCT in the frame of reference to sociological theorizing and research in Europe.

Only a small number of studies have been conducted from the perspective of Rational Choice Theory in literature. [Kilbourne \(1990\)](#) did a feminist critique of the separative model of self in the frame of reference to RCT, but the researcher did not explore RCT from any piece of literature. [Macdonold \(2003\)](#) investigated that instrumentalist-empiricism and scientific realism were the epistemological foundation for RCT, but this researcher also did not explore realism or scientific realism of RCT from any literary piece of work. Exploring RCT in economic perspective from any novel has been neglected or considered insignificant because research has not yet been accomplished in that paradigm. The present study will attempt to fulfill these gaps and lapses and will explore new horizons of the interdisciplinary study of economics especially RCT and literature.

Different research scholars have accomplished their research on Hardy's *The Return of the Native* from different perspectives. Bjork (1974) investigated 'visible essences'/ Hellenism and pagan self-assertion from the structure of the novel. [Mickelson \(1974\)](#) explored the characters of this novel as caged birds that

attempted to escape from the traps of family, sex, marriage, and society. [O'hara \(1997\)](#) explored the elements of Victorian anthropology in the form of cultural journey from primitivism (ancient superstitions) to civilization (modernity) form this novel. [Ford \(2005\)](#) sorted out a comparison between *The Return of the Native* and Alain-Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes* in the form of Fournier's borrowing Ganache the Bohemian from Hardy's the Reddleman. [Burger \(2009\)](#) investigated a contrast between Clym's return to his native land and Eustacia's longing for escaping to her native land. [Ramel \(2010\)](#) explored Eustacia's failing to adapt herself to the demands of Darwinian evolution and Lacanian 'The Real'. But a lot is to be done in studying Hardy's novels from the perspective of economics, especially Rational Choice Theory, which the present study will attempt to conduct in order to explore a new realm of research.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding Rational Choice Theory

[\(George Homans-a 1961\)](#) sociologist is a pioneer of Rational Choice Theory because the root of RCT is found in his concepts. He declares that individuals in order to satisfy their needs and self-interest, will choose from alternatives for getting maximization from the perspective of reward and punishment. His actor is a rational profit-seeker.

Since the 1980s, in order to improve our understanding of real-world phenomena, Rational Choice Theory has rapidly grown in social sciences i.e. criminology, sociology, political science, and law. Macro- and micronational choice models were used in sociological articles in the 1980s. RCT was developed as a rational social theory by Coleman. It emerged in social science disciplines and

law in the 1980s and 1990s. It has been used in criminal behavior and the criminal justice system.

The term 'rational' with its incompatible usage has been defined by different critics in a different way. For some theorists, it is logically consistent. For [Sen \(1974\)](#), rationality is the relationship between choices and preferences. Some hold if someone possesses conscious faculties, is 'rational'. For some, the action led to satisfaction, to what was desired is 'rational'. Others tend to mean by 'rational' is whatever is widely accepted and conventionally agreed ([Machan, 1980](#)).

The term 'choice' is a selection from alternatives. For an economist, 'choice' means revealed preference of the action or behavior of someone exposed to an existing range of alternatives. Rational choice is concerned with possible uses as well as uses that indicate both aspects of choice within one phenomenon ([Machan, 1980](#)). The choice behavior and decision-making process of a decision-maker are observed in Rational Choice Theory ([Richter, 1971](#)).

Rational Choice Theory (RCT) is a fundamental theory of economics that has

been prevailed in social sciences over the last decades. RCT deals with individual action, not with groups or collective group behavior in which an actor chooses an action rationally that is based on a hierarchy of preferences that promises to minimize costs and maximize benefits ([Zey, 1998](#)). Individual actors make their own decisions, and individual has a preference among the available choices. In RCT, the consumer chooses the most preferred alternative with a maximizing utility function. [Harsanyi \(1986\)](#) seeks the root of RCT in Decision theory (individual behavior under uncertainty and risk), Game theory (rational behavior by two or more interacting individuals), and Ethics (theory of rational value judgment). RCT is based on rational decisions that are informed by the probable consequences of that action ([Akers, 1990](#)). As per [Chapman \(1994\)](#), RCT encompasses 'dominance' in the form of a rational person's never choosing anything that he or she values less than other available alternatives and 'consistency' in the form of a rational chooser's continuing to choose in a way that does not contradict his or her earlier choices. Thus, an actor of RCT is a seeker of maximization.

Diagram of Cold gain Maximizer

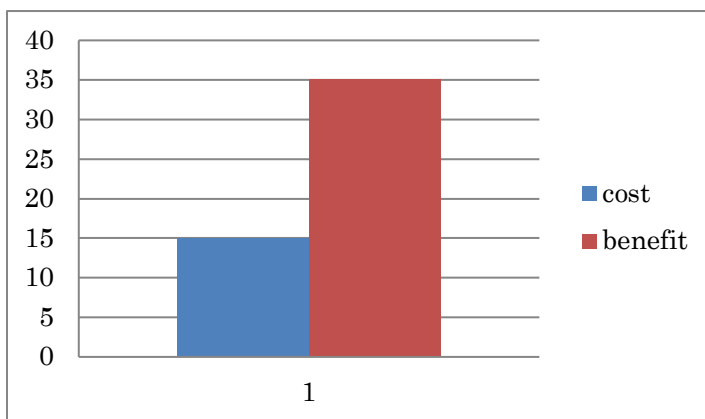


Figure 1

As per Figure 1, an actor has a minimum cost (15) but gets maximum benefit (35) in Rational Choice Theory.

Offenders' Rational Choice Theory

Scope of Rational Choice Theory is wide enough to be applied to the circumstances of everyday life, including crime. Decisions and choices made by the offenders give birth to criminal behavior. Individualism, self-interest, and maximizing the benefit of RCT lead towards criminal behavior. There are two levels of application of RCT on offenders' behavior: first, all offenders are rational actors whose conscious decision-making facilitates them to gain maximum benefits from their criminal activities. Second, the offenders make criminal decisions because of having bounded/ limited rationality in the form of emotional arousal that makes them out of control ([Simpson, 2000](#)).

Deterrence Theory and Rational Choice Theory

Deterrence theory has been taken as the subtype of Rational Choice Theory. In Deterrence theory, criminal acts are inhibited and deterred because of the fear of a sanction or plenty. It refrains someone from committing a crime. Rationality is used in both Offender's Rational Choice Theory and DT. In the former, the rational and self-interested offender commits a crime for fulfilling some needs. In the latter theory, rationality is used for refraining from crime and its punishment. Committing crime by free will or human choice is called a field agency in criminology ([McCarthy, 2002](#)). Thus, there is a relationship between DT and RCT that will be explored from different characters of Hardy's *The Return*.

Research Methodology

The present study was qualitative because it analyzed the 'words and phrases' of

Hardy's *The Return of the Native*. The paradigm of the present research was Rational Choice Theory and employed research method of textual analysis. Primary data were collected from Hardy's *The Return*, while secondary data were collected from published and online books and scholarly articles written on a different perspective of Rational Choice Theory and Hardy's this novel. The procedure of the analysis was completed in different steps. In the first step, Rational Choice Theory was studied from different authentic books, and articles and notes were prepared for the theoretical framework. In the second step, different research articles published on RCT and Hardy's *The Return* were studied and reviewed for the literature review of this study. In the third step, the lines from this novel were highlighted in which RCT was reflected. In the fourth step, the marked lines were analyzed from the perspective of Rational Choice Theory for seeking the findings of this study.

Analysis and Discussion

Hardy's *The Return* (1878) deals with the natives and their returns. Eustacia- a city-girl abhors being stuck in rustic Egdon Heath, and Clym- a manager of a diamond merchant in Paris returns to his native land-Egdon. Eustacia has clandestine love with Wildeve, innkeeper, but this Damon ends up seeing Thomasin, cousin of Clym. Diggory Venn, a reddleman, loves Thomasin, but she rejects him. Since Eustacia loves Paris, she falls in love with Clym, who returns home from Paris. Clym's mother, Mrs. Yeobright, does not like Eustacia, but her son, Clym, separates from her, and both get married. Eustacia's happiness turns into frustration and disloyalty after Clym's becoming semi-blind and furze-cutter of low status. She gets closer to her former flame- Wildeve. Meanwhile, Clym's mother tries to reconcile with her son,

comes to see him, sees him entering his house, but he sleeps immediately because of fatigue. She looks at the door but Eustacia does not open the door because of the presence of Wildeve at her home at that time. Broken-hearted mother returns with sobs and sighs, and an adder sting her on the way, but she opens her heart hurt by her son to a little boy Johnny before her death. Clym, considering his wife responsible for his mother's death, fights her, and both separate. Eustacia decides to elope with the newly rich Wildeve, who gets eleven thousand pounds from heredity. A severe storm arrives on the night of departure, and Wildeve also drowns in an attempt to save drowning Eustacia. Clym and Thomasin are devastated because the former considers himself responsible for the deaths of two women i.e. his mother and his wife, and the latter is a widow of Wildeve with a newly born baby. Later on Thomasin marries Venn and Clym becomes a preacher.

In the character of Clym, his unprofitable interest of life is reflected in the perspective of Rational Choice Theory. Clym does not take economic benefit from his rational choice thinking. He does not like to enjoy a high-class financial status but a high-class teaching. He does not like to get economic benefit but wants to give the benefit of education to the people of Egdon Heath. It is reflected when he asks Eustacia to help him in educating his fellow-beings: "I have come to clean away these cobwebs," "Would you like to help me—by high-class teaching? We might benefit them much" (Hardy, 1878/1994, p. 219).

Economic interest is the only rational decision in Rational Choice Theory but for Clym his occupation in Paris that gave him money and status was just "the idlest, vainest, most effeminate business" (Hardy, p. 202). An agent of Rational Choice Theory maximizes his utility and

this self-interested rational agent is described as a "cold gain maximizer" (Thaler, 2000). On the contrary, Clym decides to choose some rational occupation like building a school for the ignorant people of his village. As he tells to Humphrey that he would "try to follow some rational occupation among the people I knew best...I shall keep a school as near to Egdon as possible" (Hardy, p. 202).

Clym having an unprofitable interest towards Rational Choice Theory plans to do something great and worthy before his death. He wants to educate the ignorant people of Egdon who do not like education. For old Humphrey, sending children to school only does harm. Even as per Clym's mother, his plan to become a schoolmaster doomed to be failed, "Your fancies will be your ruin, Clym" (Hardy, p. 206). His mother being a rational agent of Rational Choice Theory wants to see her son as a rich man. She expresses her wish to him, "I should try to lift you out of this life into something richer" (p. 210). Clym and Eustacia get married because he thinks that she would help him in educating the people. As he tells his mother, "if I take a school an educated woman would be invaluable as a help to me" (p. 227). It shows that there is no economic interest in Clym's plan of establishing a school as well as in getting married Eustacia except betterment of his fellow-beings.

Clym's mind was not well-proportioned because it lacked Rational Choice Theory in an economic perspective. According to Hardy, his throwing up business in Paris and his leading a humble life of furze-cutter abjuring pompous life of manager of a diamond dealer, makes him a man of not well-proportioned minded person. Hardy says, "was Yeobright's mind well-proportioned? No. A well proportioned mind is one which shows no particular bias;..." "It never would have allowed Yeobright to do such a ridiculous

thing as throw up his business to benefit his fellow-creatures" (pp. 204-205).

Clym's decision of returning to the backward world reflects unprofitable Rational Choice Theory. His free choice does not choose the wealthy and prosperous life of Paris, but it selects humble rural life of Egdon Heath with the noble purpose of educating the ignorant people of his village. His mother criticizes his son's free choice saying, "I hadn't the least idea that you meant to go backward in the world by your own free choice" (Hardy, p. 207). His free choice is different from economic free choice of Rational Choice Theory. In this economic theory, free choices result in benefit and utility for the individual. It attempts to maximize benefit and minimize costs (Sondej, 2006). Unprofitable free choice of Clym does not bother to take financial assistance from the grandfather of his wife when he becomes semi-blind instead he prefers to furze-cutting. His wife says to him, "my grandfather offers to assist us, if we require assistance" (p.295). But her husband rejects her offer saying, "we don't require it. If go furze-cutting we shall be fairly well off" (ibid.).

Wildevé is a cold gain maximize, 'the man of sentiment', 'Rousseau of Egdon'. Being a rational agent in an economic perspective, he consumes less but invests a lot for getting benefit from his investment. He becomes rich and prosperous after getting eleven thousand pounds from heredity. Eustacia congratulates him on becoming a wealthy person and he replies, "on what? O yes; on my eleven thousand pounds, you mean" (Hardy, p. 355). This maximizer tells her future plans about his investment, "I shall permanently invest nine thousand pounds, keep one thousand as ready money, and with the remaining thousand travel for a year or so" (ibid.). He intends to consume two thousand pounds only but invests nine thousand. It is his way of

entrapping money-minded Eustacia through his economic rationality. He asks Eustacia, "shall I go with you? I am rich now" (p. 404).

Eustacia being a money-minded lady prefers to available choices. She prefers to Wildevé first then Clym. She is always in search of better choice. She wants to enjoy a prosperous life of Paris that is the city of "rookery of pomp and vanity" (Hardy, 1878/1994, p. 119). Being rational agent, she chooses Wildevé first but after sometime she realizes that Clym is a better option because he just returned from Paris after spending many years. Leading life in Paris is like living in heaven for Eustacia. She expresses her longing to Clym, "I should like Paris, I love you for yourself alone. To be your wife and live in Paris would be heaven to me" (p. 235). She wishes to live in Paris with Clym. She says to him, "Clym! I don't mind how humbly we live there at first, if it can only be Paris not Egdon Heath" (p.290).

Eustacia being a rational agent and having an economic interest towards Rational Choice Theory shifts her loyalties from her contented husband to Wildevé again for getting an opportunity to lead a prosperous life in Paris. Clym starts to live a humble life of a furze-cutter on Egdon Heath. His economic status becomes very low. She shifts her loyalties from her husband to Wildevé. Her mother-in-law truly suspects her and asks her if Wildevé gives her money. Eustacia tells her, "you have now suspected me of secretly favouring another man for money!" (Hardy, p. 287). She starts to take interest in Wildevé again after his receiving eleven thousand pounds from heredity. She reflects, "he might give me all I desire!" (Hardy, p.353). When Wildevé becomes a rich person he asks her about his husband's status, "is there any chance of Mr. Yeobright getting better?" (p. 309). He makes her realize his economically high position and low status of her husband.

She leaves her husband's home on his yelling at her due to come to know about the presence of a mysterious man at their home that day when his mother came for reconciliation. She decides to elope with Wildevve to Budmouth where she wants to live. She says to Wildevve, "I can get to Paris, where I want to be" (p. 404).

Eustacia's criminal rational choices make her offender and there were financial benefits behind her decision of eloping with newly rich Wildevve. Offenders' decisions produce criminal behavior. In order to live a free and prosperous life in Paris, Eustacia commits the crimes of deceit and infidelity. Disloyal Eustacia deceives her husband. She is an offender against Victorian society because she violates Victorian moral standards and privileged norms. Wildevve visits her in the absence of her husband. She did not open the door when her mother-in-law came to her home for reconciliation because Wildevve was at her home that time. She deceives her husband first then her grandfather. Night before her elopement, she says to Wildevve, "help me to get to Budmouth harbour without my grandfather's and my husband's knowledge" (Hardy, p. 404).

At the outset, Eustacia's remaining aloof from others leads her towards criminal behavior. As per Individual Gain theory of criminology, an offender sees himself or herself as an individual rather than a part of society. Eustacia does not mix up with the people of Egdon Heath. She goes to church after many weeks. Her remaining aloof and remaining absent from the church enables Susan to consider her as a 'witch'. Susan pricks her with a long needle as a punishment of bewitching her children.

Like Eustacia, even the little boy Johnny Nonsuch is a rational agent who prefers to sixpence for keeping up her bonfire. She says to the boy, "I will give

you a crooked six-pence" (Hardy, p. 66). The little boy is also a money-minded agent because when Eustacia asks if he would not be afraid when going to home alone, he replies, "no, because I shall have the crooked sixpence" (p. 68). She invests six-pence for entrapping Wildevve because she pays it to the boy for keeping the bonfire up as a signal for calling Wildevve. When he comes after seeing her signal fire, she clearly asks him to leave Thomasin and getting married to her, Eustacia asks, "if you own to me that the wedding is broken off because you love me best" (p. 72). Wildevve was her first choice.

Charley's preference to hold Eustacia's hand rather than taking money reflects a different kind of Rational Choice Theory. There is no economic benefit in Charley's rational choice. His preferring to hold her hand for a quarter of an hour and kissing it instead of taking five shillings for giving to her his role of the Turkish Knight for one night shows his sensual love with her. On offering money to take for giving his role to Eustacia, he says to her, "money won't do it" (Hardy, p. 148).

Captain Vye also is not devoid of rational thinking of Rational Choice Theory because he admires Clym as a real pursuing man who was a manager to a diamond merchant in Paris. He praises Clym for establishing his blazing business in Paris. He snubs Sam and Humphrey saying, "you may make away with a deal of money and be neither drunkard nor glutton" ([Hardy, 1878/1994, p.125](#)). For him, drinking and gluttony is not life but making money is the purpose of life.

Offender's Rational Choice Theory is reflected in Wildevve's winning Mrs. Yeobright's money from Christian in dice. He deceives him and entraps him in the net of gambling quoting newly rich gamblers all around the world, i.e., an Italian who with a Louis won ten thousand pounds within twenty-four hours, a waiter

of London who gambled, became a rich person and became Governor of Madras, and an American who lost his last dollar, watch, chain, umbrella and breeches but won all these again and became a rich man. Wildeve entraps him saying if he ought to win some money “any woman would marry you then” (p. 266). Christian wins three shillings first then loses Mrs. Yeobright’s hundred guineas from Wildeve. Offender’s Rational Choice Theory is reflected in both Wildeve and Christian because the former wins money by deceit and the latter loses money by greed of getting money for marriage.

Diggory Venn violates Offender’s Rational Choice Theory because unlike Wildeve and Christian he does not love money for his own sake. He plays dice with Wildeve. He wins six guineas first then seventy nine then all hundred of Mrs. Yeobright from him. He is not a money-minded person because he instead of taking money returns to Thomasin for whom she sent it by Christian. Instead of telling Thomasin the whole adventurous story of losing money by Christian and then winning again from Wildeve, the reddleman hands over money to Thomasin just saying, “I have something to give you privately from Mrs. Yeobright” (Hardy, p. 277). Venn accepts the Offender’s Rational Choice Theory and violates Deterrence Theory. DT restrains someone from committing crime because of fear of punishment. He violates DT because without thinking its punishment, he shoots towards Wildeve when he comes out from Eustacia’s house. Hardy says that the Reddleman exasperated after seeing Wildeve outside of Clym's house and "he was prepared to go to any lengths short of absolutely shooting him" (p. 319).

Venn becomes the rational agent for marrying Thomasin at the end. He does

not remain Reddleman and starts to collect money for marrying Thomasin. He shows her this desire of earning money, saying, "I am given up body and soul to the making of money. Money is all my dream" (Hardy, p. 464).

Conclusion

Findings of the present study were: i. reflection of Rational Choice Theory in individual actors’ i.e. Eustacia and Wildeve preference to their available choices; ii. Eustacia’s economic and Clym’s unprofitable interest in life in the perspective of RCT; iii. reflection of Offender’s Rational Choice Theory in the actions of Eustacia, Wildeve and Diggory Venn explored from Hardy’s *The Return of the Native*.

As it has been stated earlier, the present research was qualitative in nature and used research method of textual analysis. The present study was limited to only one novel of Thomas Hardy’s *The Return of the Native*. None of the previous studies explored the reflection of Rational Choice Theory from this novel that was seen in Eustacia and Wildeve’s preference to their available choices and in the actions of offenders i.e. Eustacia, Wildeve, and Diggory Venn.

This study was an initiative for opening new horizons of research on application of Rational Choice Theory to literature. Hence, further research may be needed to add integrity and credibility to the results of this initiative. The research scholars of the future might work on the presence of Rational Choice Theory in the other novels of Hardy i.e., *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*, etc. They might work on George Eliot’s novels also from the perspective of this economic theory of choices and rationality.

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