



FACTICITY AND FAILURE: AN ONTOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THOMAS HARDY'S FICTION

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ABSTRACT- The article engages with Hardy's canonical fictional works from the perspective of the existentialist notion of facticity and, also, its relation with free will. His globally acclaimed masterpieces, *The Return of the Native* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, have been explicated with the help of the five conceptual components of the philosophical stance of facticity propounded by Jean Paul Sartre: place, past, surroundings, fellow-brethren, and death. Hardy's predilection for a more pessimistic portrayal of various dimensions of life and foregrounding failure has always remained a guiding factor for his critics. However, by locating the texts in the frame of selected theoretical postulates and substantiating the relevant features with the appropriate textual instances, the study has made a crucial intervention in the critical tradition pivoted on Hardy's oeuvre. Therefore, the article contributes to the study of the great Victorian novelist's tragic vision by elaborating it from a different theoretical position and locating it in a thicker philosophical frame. Methodologically, the approach is a qualitative one that relies purely on the textual analysis for its interpretative activity. Thus, the critique stands as a significant contribution to the philosophical reading of canonical literature that, in turn, triggers social awareness besides intellectual accomplishment.

Keywords: Existentialism, Novel, Thomas Hardy, Facticity, Jean Paul Sartre

I. INTRODUCTION

Delineation of existential conditions and crises remains among the prime propensities of *littérateurs* across the globe. The predilection has helped to produce a philosophically intriguing and socially charged repository of the anthropocentric literary writings. Accordingly, the self-reflexive style of creative writing has brought forth a rich yield of literary masterpieces that aim to depict and, also, evaluate the life on the planet. Consequently, the proliferation of the kind of works has generated an iridescence of philosophies and postulates vis-à-vis the perplexing issue of human existence. One among the philosophical paradigms is the existentialist one that aims at resolving the problems arising in men's lives (Kaelin, 1966, p. 13). However, despite superabundance of ideas and ideals regarding various dimensions of life, the existential riddle continues to confuse mankind. Therefore, the unfathomable profundity of the existentialist debates and discourses demands more scrupulous scrutiny and philosophically informed critiques.

Thomas Hardy, one of the doyens among the Victorian novelists, has thematized the existential issues in his novels. By fictionalizing the universal human concerns, the novelist has found a place in an array of the writers marked by great names, ranging from Hemingway to Kafka and Beckett to Dostoevsky. The sages have put an unmistakably profound impact on the thinking patterns across the globe and their works have shaken the universal consciousness. They have helped the people floating directionless amidst the chaotic streams of pointlessness by guiding them through. The significance of the ideas of these invigorating intellectuals regarding human condition cannot be undermined. Although some of them, like Camus and Conrad, have come up with more pessimistic conclusions, their role in triggering the anthropocentric conscious is indisputable.

Hardy's is, like of Beckett and Hemingway, a bleak version of the world. This article approaches his oeuvre by delimiting focus on his prime creations, that is, *The Return of the Native* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. The former novel, *The Return of the Native*, has been acclaimed as "unique in Hardy's fiction" (Harvey, 2003, p. 66). It narrates how mankind is struggling to get out of the cruel clutch of the things beyond its control. Through the story of Clym Yeobright and Eustacia Vye, Hardy has given way to his notion of determinism. The latter one, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, has been eulogized as "the greatest of the Wessex novels" (Duffin, 1991, p. 58). It covers miseries of the innocent Tess, from seduction to destruction. In short, both the novels consummately represent the writer's pessimistic vision and fatalist approach.

Thus, delimiting focus on these two selected novels, the article attempts to resolve the research questions: i) how has Hardy thematized existential concerns and ontological crises in his *The Return of the Native* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*? ii) In what ways does Hardy's fictional representation of the dilemmas of

existence coincide with the existentialist philosophical notions? Having negotiated these critical questions and concerns, the study is deemed to be a significant one. It will facilitate to understand the complex existential debates through literary elaborations and, also, contribute to unveil some newer dimensions of Hardy's fiction and thought.

II. METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study falls in the domain of qualitative paradigm that is an appropriate approach for identification of "themes or patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). As the study is descriptive in nature, it uses the method of textual analysis that "involves a close encounter with the work itself" (in Griffin, 2013, p. 160). Therefore, all the interpretations and inferences have been facilitated by close reading of the texts in the light of the principles of textual analysis.

As the main argument of the study is with reference to the existential condition of mankind in the cosmic scheme of things, the existentialist philosophical interpretations and ontological conceptualizations provide the most relevant theoretical benchmark against which Hardy's stance can be examined. Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943) provides the theoretical underpinnings of the framework. However, the article is not an inclusive one to engage with all the existentialist perspectives present in the selected texts; but instead it specifically focusses the notions of facticity and free will. Conceptualization of *free will* is essential to the existentialist philosophical endeavors. In Warnock words: "So, it is necessary to add that for Existentialists, uniquely, the problem of freedom in a sense a practical problem" (1971, p. 2). She also takes existentialists' "interest in human freedom" (1971, p.1) as their defining feature. Consequently, discussion of facticity becomes indispensable as it poses a challenge to free will. Desan writes describing the sense of the term:

The whole set of obstacles which freedom has to face is designated by Sartre under the denomination "facticity". It includes five "facts" or data, namely: *my place, my past, my surroundings, my fellow-brethren, my death.* (1954, p. 107)

In short, not only free will but also the obstacles hindering it are central to the existentialist thought. A man spends his life struggling to transcend these five hurdles categorized under facticity. Thus, these specific postulates culled from an array of the postulates in the existentialist paradigms are guiding the critique developed in the article.

Existentialist Weltanschauung and its Literary Representations

Existentialist worldview gained currency after the west faced the cruelest ramifications of the world wars. Hence, its heyday is to be found in the latter half of the last century, the twentieth one. As it was more informed by the post-war consciousness, it took human life as the prime object of study. Gradually, it evolved into a full-fledged philosophy and "now [it] applies to a vision of condition and existence of man, his place and function in the world" (Cuddon, 1999, p. 294). The distinctive of existentialism is that it focuses *being* and its manifestations without succumbing to the abstruse abstractions that are merely metaphysical in nature.

Jean Paul Sartre, the French philosopher, is the representative figure of the philosophical field and the "leader in the movement" (Kaelin, 1966, p. 14). His magnum opus *Being and Nothingness* (1943) is a seminal philosophical text that led foundation of an intellectual paradigm shift that was to influence proceeding theories, ranging from Poststructuralism to postmodernism. Warnock writes in her prefatory note to the book that it is "a text-book of existentialism" (Sartre, 1986, p. viii). Engaging with the prime postulates of the existentialist though — being, nothingness, transcendence, faith, facticity and many other issues— the work philosophize and explain major factors regulating human existence in the world.

Blackham's inclusive study (1959) surveys main ideas and argument of six of the leading thinkers in the field. The salient quality of the work is that it is marked by lucidity and clarity, a rare feature to be found in the philosophical writings. The philosopher covered in the study are Kierkegaard, Sartre, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Jaspers, and Marcel. The names bespeak the breadth and width of the work and, also, its conceptual density. With the aim to encapsulate ideas of the thinkers whose intellectual contribution "has not been slight" (Blackham, 1959, p. 165), Blackham attempts to cover both the streams of the paradigm: theist existentialism led by Kierkegaard, and atheist existentialism heralded by Sartre.

Warnock's work (1971) provides an encompassing study of the variety of interpretations and diversity of thought found in the field. She identifies that both the methodological approach adopted by the philosophers in the field and the conceptual nexus "unite them into a recognizable 'school' of philosophy" (1971, p. 133). She praises this unique methodology, "Concrete Imagination" (1971, p. 133), without mincing the words. Besides extoling the insight and appropriateness of the philosophical group, she also

expresses her skepticism towards the “anti-scientific dogmatism” (1971, p. 140) exhibited by them. Thus, the study presents a comprehensive critical introduction to the existentialist version of the western philosophy.

Malpas (in Crowell, 2011) explains how “existentialism stands in a special relationship to literature” (p. 291). He explores various trajectories that help to develop a nexus between the two categories, ranging from the existentialist fiction to the numerous social triggers. There is also a vocal mention of the over-reliance of these domains on each other that often damages literature’s aesthetic value on one hand and on the other hand vulgarizes existentialist philosophy. In short, the work presents a minute analysis of all the intricacies being precipitated by reciprocity, the interaction between the philosophical and the literary.

Gómez-Alonso’s study (2020) negotiates the idea of facticity by explaining reciprocity between categories like knowledge and experience, ontological dependency and social dependency (p. 495), and so on. For his exploration of the complex socio-epistemological discourses, he consults Nuno Venturinha’s theorization of consciousness and its relation with various forms of knowledge. Thus, by exploring the complex philosophical notions, he tries to explain the situatedness of human beings in reality and, in turn, its impact on the endeavour for achieving an objective perspective.

Hardy’s Vision of the World

Hardy has always been in the limelight since the early modern period. His works have managed to survive the bitterest lambastes from his contemporaries and, ultimately, got a place among the English classics. Critical acclaim of the variety and the intensity of his works have attested his canonicity both as the novelist and the poet. Going through “a formidable bulk” (Cox 1970: xiii) of the critical material produced about his personality, philosophy, novels, and poetry demands efforts and acumen.

Bloom’s *Thomas Hardy* (1987), is an anthology of the critical essays, chronologically arranged, on writer’s life and fiction. The encompassing work includes pieces from many a famous critics. The introduction of the work stands as an authentic autonomous critique of the novelist’s fictional and poetic contribution to the rich repository of English literature. Often, the ethnic insularity finds its way in Blooms idiom and he praises the novelist with a visible flavour of the nationalist zeal, as he is known for his celebratory rhetoric about the canonical western writers. Despite the hyperbolic renderings, overall the work presents authentic information about Hardy and his various works.

Orel’s study (1987), offers discussion of the ignored aspects of the personality of the great English novelist and poet, Hardy. Deviating from his pessimism and impressive style, Orel tends to present discussion of Hardy’s architectural acumen as exhibited in his novels, his propensity for and awareness of theatre and law, his friendships with contemporary literary figures, and his taste for scientific knowledge that was flourishing at the time. Orel complains about the indifference shown by both the critics and the public about these dimensions of Hardy’s personality. He finds role of his knowledge of “several hard sciences” in shaping of his “specific philosophy” (1987, p. 169). So, he has tried to shed light on the lesser known aspects of Hardy.

Widdowson (1989) attempts “to break the frame in which that critical picture” (1989, p. 198) of Hardy has been fixed. His is an alternative vision of Hardy who, according to Widdowson, has been lopsidedly represented by the critical establishment and literary elite. With the aim to challenge the normative portrayal of the novelists, he goes to the extent of claiming having introduced “*Another Wessex; Another Thomas Hardy*” (1989, p. 198). His Hardy, he claims, is a “more spirited figure” (1989, p. 226), contrary to his stereotypical image as a hopeless fatalist. As far as the argument of the study is concerned, it does proffer an unconventional view of Hardy that can be placed vis-à-vis the traditional one.

Harvey’s (2003) is the work that proffers insights about Hardy’s novels by applying various theoretical lenses on them, ranging from structuralism to deconstruction and Marxism to feminism. This feature of the study gives it a unique flavour and helps the readers to approach Hardy’s novels from different, often conflicting, perspectives. Another quality of the work is that Harvey has tried to place his arguments in the critical continuum by substantiating all his claims with the ideas of his predecessors. However, he has avoided slavish attitude in this regard. For instance, negating his image as a person who seems to have created a pointless world, Harvey writes: “Hardy’s is not a nihilistic vision” (2003, p. 66). Thus, it is an interesting and authentic critique of Hardy’s vision and works.

Henson (2011) has approached representation of landscape and gender with reference to the Victorian novelists including Thomas Hardy. She has elegantly explored the fictional works to identify peculiar patterns of landscape that “intersect with a number of areas of contemporary social and ideological preoccupations” (p.4). Her work explains how Hardy, also Eliot and Bronte, found traction in the current nationalist debates and ethnic discourses. Thus, she speaks about and textually evidences the relevance of the canonical writers in the present times.

Yadav and Yadav (2020) has given an interesting tweak to the normative reading of the pervasive pessimism found in Hardy's novels. According to them the bleak picture of Hardy's world appears when we shift our attention totally to the circumstances, coincidence and misfortunes, ignoring the brighter side that is to be found with his characters. They propose that Hardy's "characters, despite facing the irony of fate and chance, have a shining line of hope, faith and love in their lives" (p. 48). Thus, the study brings to the limelight the optimistic perspectives present in Hardy's fiction.

Exploration of Facticity in the Selected Novels

The selected texts represent a world in which the characters have been shown to be struggling to transcend the hurdles positioned to hinder their freedom and success. All the obstacles— spatial limits, temporal confines, environmental factors, social pressures, and demise— have been found at work to curtail characters' sphere of action and progress. These multifarious impediments punctuate life in Hardy's fictional world. Following discussion of the texts locates the existential predicament of Hardy's characters into the Sartrean frame of facticity.

The list of hurdles begins with mention of the spatial situatedness, rendered precisely as *place*. The spatial factor plays a pivotal role in the characters' lives in both of the selected novels. In *The Return of the Native*, Egdon Heath is not only the stage for the tragedy but also plays an active role in aggravating the situation. Also the characters themselves are aware of the ruinous role of the place in their lives. Eustacia, the most ambitious characters of the novel, detests its engulfing presence and controlling power. She considers it to be "her Hades" where she always finds herself "eternally unreconciled" (Hardy, 2006, p. 64). Moreover, it is the Heath that nurtures the deadly snake that kills Mrs Yeobright, an innocent lady. And eventually, it takes lives of Eustacia and Wildeve by drowning them. Likewise, in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Tess' rape by Alec is facilitated by the very place they were at. Had they not been in the seductive and lulling place, she could have escaped Alec's advancements. Thus, the spatial setting has played an instrumental role in encouraging Alec to think of rape and the drowsy Tess to succumb to situation. In short, place remains an active participant in the tragic actions of both the novels.

The second obstacle is temporal in its nature, that is, the intrusive past of the characters. The past influences the present and, also, plays its role to shape the future. In *The Return of the Native*, Mrs Yeobright's misinterpretation of the situation, when she could not get her son's door opened for her, is rooted in her hostile relation with her daughter-in-law. The different nature of their mutual relation in the past would have averted the misunderstanding. Her mistrust of Eustacia makes her feel desperate and return without meeting her son. And the unfortunate return results in her death on the way back home and it also brings the tragic turning point in her son's life. The incident clearly shows relevance of the past to the present. In other novel chosen for analysis, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, also *past* is found playing its role in precipitation of the tragic conditions. Tess' tragedy is a result of a *sin* of her committed in the past, her act of succumbing to seduction of Alec and consequent sexual intercourse. The past chases her and entails Clare's decision of desertion. Although Clare's ultimate reconciliatory remarks soothes her soul "You were more sinned against than sinning, that I admit" (2008, p. 263), the damage has already been done and it's too late to reclaim her now. So, here every subsequent calamity faced by Tess is the consequence of this unwilled happening of the past. The examples confirm the dire repercussions of the events of the past on the lives of Hardy's characters.

Surrounding, the third component of facticity, also stands as a potent obstacle to human freedom in Hardy's fiction. Even Hardy goes a step ahead of Sartre who takes surrounding to be an indifferent hurdle that can be transcended but Hardy portrays it as an unsurpassable hurdle and an adverse actor that opposes mankind. In *The Return of the Native*, surrounding overwhelms the characters' lives and they stand helpless in its clutch. Eustacia exclaims in desperation:

"O world of putting me into this imperfect, ill-Conceived world! I was capable of much; I have been injured and blighted and crushed by things beyond my control! O how hard it is of Heaven to devise such tortures for me, who have done no harm to Heaven at all! (Hardy 2006, p. 359)

She wants a supportive surrounding that may help her to achieve her goals and accomplish her aspirations. On the contrary, she has been thrown into an environment where she gets all her ambitions countered by the malevolent forces. Same fate is shared by the other major characters of the novel: Cym, Mrs Yeobright, Wildeve and others. Also, in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, it is the surrounding, along with the place, which forces the innocent Tess to surrender to the lure. In this way, the factor of surrounding disturbs the lives of Hardy's characters and brings ruinous results to them.

Yet another impediment to human beings' freedom has been described as "My fellow brethren" by Sartre. Human beings have been made to mutually influence freedom of one another. And there is no exception in this continuous flow of influences and intrusions. In *The Return of the Native*, various characters have been

found influencing the lives of the others. Clym's arrival from the Paris, with full charisma of enchanting exposures, diminishes the chances of Wildeve's marriage with Eustacia. Otherwise, the matter was almost settled between them. Similarly, Eustacia attempts to attract Clym and his reciprocations cause a serious clash between him, the son, and Mrs. Yeobright, his mother. Mrs. Yeobright's death is a direct result of this mutual distrust as she fails to tolerate the supposed indifference of her dearest son:

Her eyes were fixed on the ground; within her two sights were graven; that of Clym's hook and the brambles at the door, and that of a woman's face at a window. Her lips trembled, becoming unnaturally thin, as she murmured, "'Tis too much - Clym, how can he bear to do it! He is at home, and yet he lets her shut the door against me. "

(2006, p. 288)

The anguish felt by the lady is excruciating for her and unmistakable for the readers, "'Tis too much - Clym". The same pattern is found in the other novel, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Here, Alec D'Urberville ruins Tess by deflowering her. At the end, arrival of Clare creates a situation where Tess cannot help killing Alec. The instances can be multiplied as both the texts are replete with the kind of events and incidents. Precisely, this cycle of influences keeps damaging their lives and aggravating their existential crises.

Death is the "tragic finale", In Desan's words, and the last of the barriers before human freedom that terminates the struggle. Sartre's discussion of facticity places death at the end of all the impediment as pushes the humans from existence to nothingness. The loss of concrete existence and collapse into the nebulous nothingness brings end to all the efforts, mostly futile, to transcend facticity and enjoy complete freedom. The feature has found a vociferous expression and clear reflection in both of the selected fictional works by Hardy. They play an integral role in the tragic world created in these novels. In *The Return of the Native*, Mrs Yeobright's faces her death under lamentable circumstances. Her demise further creates a complication which stands unresolved until Wildeve and Eustacia pay the penalty and lose their lives in their attempt to flee from Egdon Heath. Having seen all these unfortunate deaths, the protagonist, Clym, finds himself desolate at the end of the narrative. He has lost his loving mother, the source of serenity, and his beloved wife, the fountain of vitality for him. At this point, Hardy has explicated the cruel strategy of nature that is at work to extirpate human lives mercilessly:

Misfortune has struck them gracefully, cutting off their erratic histories with a catastrophic dash, instead of, as with many, attenuating each life to an uninteresting meagerness through long years of wrinkles, neglect, and decay. (Hardy 2006:385)

The gradually moving blade of extinction terminates human lives and throw them into the darkness of nothingness. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Tess has to suffer the pain of several deaths in her family. John Durbeyfield, her dear father, leaves her helpless in the cruel patriarchal world where she has to suffer ramifications of the sins committed by others. Later on, Sorrow, her illegitimate but dear son, leaves the world making her further miserable. Eventually, she herself has been hanged for killing Alec, the man responsible for her tragic sufferings. Hardy's rendering of her death remains the most succinct and poignantly ironic expression of the sense of injustice:

Upon the cornice of the tower a tall staff was fixed. Their eyes were riveted on it. A few minutes after the hour had struck something moved slowly up the staff, and extended itself upon the breeze. It was a black flag.

'Justice' was done, and the President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, has ended his sport with Tess. And the D'Urberville knights and dames slept on in their tombs unknowing. (2008, p. 448)

The passage shows that Tess has been a victim of social injustice throughout her life. Her death is the culminating point of the circumstantial cruelty that has crushed the innocent girl. In this manner, death carries the package of extinction for mankind in Hardy's world. Therefore, his fiction is replete with the elegiac notes and melancholic descriptions.

The elaboration evinces and evidences that all the five dimensions of Sartrean facticity have been found prevalent and pervasive in the fictional world created by Hardy: spatial stretches play a coercive role, past keeps bringing pains to the characters, environmental calamities ruin mankind, social pressures suffocate the innocent victims, and, ultimately, death terminates their very existence. Failure and futility are the defining their existential endeavors in the world of these novels. Eustacia's helplessness is representative of the collective desperation: "She cast about for any possible course which offered the least improvement on the existing state of things, and could find none" (2006, p. 259). Thus, clutched in the firm grip of facticity, mankind, as represented by the characters, fails to surpass the existential entanglement.

III. CONCLUSION

The rigorous analysis and interpretation of the selected novels — *The Return of the Native* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* — has facilitated the researchers to resolve the research questions in the light of the textually substantiated argument developed in the article. The first question seeks explanation regarding Hardy's thematization of the existential concerns and ontological crises. It has become obvious the novelist has vociferously delineated these major human concerns. His is a thorough depiction of universally relevant issues pertaining to existence. He shows his characters struggles with and, ultimately, succumbing to the forces curtailing their freedom. Deterioration is the most conspicuous mark of life in Hardy's world. The second questions is with reference to relation of Hardy's fictional representation of the dilemmas of existence with the existentialist philosophical notions. It has been brought forth that his taxonomy of the hurdles obstructing human freedom coincide with the one offered by Sartre and other existentialist philosopher through the idea of facticity. However, as his characters fail to transcend the coercive pattern of facticity, Hardy's vision is more akin to the absurdist thinkers like Albert Camus. To sum up the discussion and put forth crux of the argument, the article contributes to the critical tradition apropos Hardy's fiction by framing his selected works with the help of Sartrean notion of facticity and existentialist reflections on the issue of freedom.

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