


Existential Crisis in Hardy’s “Tess’s Lament”: Text, Context, and Psychological Praxis

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ABSTRACT

Thomas Hardy is the last of the great Victorian novelists. He is known as one of the best English novelists. He is more well-known for his novels than for his poems. Tess of d’Urbervilles: A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented is one of those hallmarking and time-beating novels, he has written. The unique thing annexed to this novel is that he has composed a non-narrative poem expressing Tess’ deep pain and pang over her loss entitled “Tess’s Lament”, which seems to be its supplementary. It appears that its miniature presents the whole through the part. Existential crisis, usually considered a complicated event, can be seen as the core of psychology, which comprises emotional, cognitive, and behavioural parts. Both in the poem "Tess's Lament" and in Tess's own life, the psychological practice of existential crises plays a key role. Whatever she does, she feels sad, alone, and helpless. It also makes her feel like her life has no meaning or purpose, and it keeps her from interacting with other people, which upsets the emotional, mental, and behavioural parts of her existence and being.

Keywords: *Hardy, Tess, pain, Existential crisis, lament.*

Thomas Hardy, a renowned novelist in the world of English literature, is the last of the great Victorians. He is better known as a novelist than as a poet. He has written about 20 novels, more than one thousand poems, and an epic in two parts. The amazing fact about him is that as a major novelist he belongs to Victorian age, but as a major poet to the twentieth century. But, unfortunately, his poetry has been undermined and not been taken seriously. His literary career that rises and falls with poetry spans over fifty years from the last half of the 19th century to the periods after the Great-War. In-between comes his novels. About his poems, says Pound that they are “the harvest of having written twenty novels first” (Hardy i). It is stated that:

Thomas Hardy was a poet by choice; a novelist by necessity. His prose fiction writing is never viewed as anything more than a temporary profession— an economically compulsory interruption of his poetic career in a world where poetry did not pay. Indeed, Hardy never held a very high opinion of the novel as an art form; if Far from the Madding Crowd paid the gas bill, that was good enough. At heart he was always a poet, considering that in verse ‘was contained the essence of all imaginative and emotional literature... (Hardy iii)

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No doubt, Hardy does his best both in his novels and verses as well, but a few poems and a few novels—especially tragic novels—by his pen are par excellence. He is a prolific writer both of poetry and fiction. However, it is admitted that he is a first-rate novelist and one of the greatest whom England has ever produced, he can't be ranked equally high in the sphere of poetry. Yet he is a poet of no mean order. No doubt, *Tess of d'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented* is one of those hallmarking and time-beating novels which he writes. The special thing which is annexed to this novel is that he composes a non-narrative poem expressing Tess' deep pain and pang over her loss entitled as "Tess's Lament" which seems to be supplementary to it. It seems that its miniature presents the whole through the part. Here, on one side, part presents the whole, while on the other side, the present presents the past with the help of the stream of consciousness in which thoughts and images flow incoherently in Tess' mind, sometimes forward and sometimes backwards embracing the chaotic nature of her thoughts and feelings. It is another thing that without reading the novel, the gist of the poem is hard to grasp. Mesmerizing fact is that Hardy has given more attention and importance to Tess in his poetry. He does not only refer to her in his novel of the same name but also to such poems as "We Field Women", "Beyond the Last Lamp", "A Maiden's Pledge", "The Ruined Maid or The Well Beloved" etc.

When it is tried to peep through the windows of Hardy's works to have glimpses of his philosophy, it is found that he is not a philosopher, but certainly a philosophical novelist and poet. Cruel fate, blind chance, never-ending heredity, and ever-affecting environment control his vision of life. Time and coincidence play a pivotal role in his works. Being a meliorist, he ever tries to reveal the higher human aspects of man's existence, thinking that the world can be improved only by human efforts. He was a keen observer of each and everything. Pains, pangs, and plights of the mass often disturb the tranquillity of his mind. The questions related to the existence and essence of man cause storm and strife in his solemn heart. He was deeply concerned in his fiction with existential questions of the human predicament, personal freedom, the attitude to God and religion, the role of destiny, failed relationships, and the sordid alienation of man. Consequently, the bent of his mind bends toward existentialism, which cares for the individual, and is close to humanism.

When the fact is concerned with existentialism, it becomes clear that it focuses on how an individual makes his/her place and position in the various fields of life on this earth, where birth is purposeless, life- meaningless, and the world- absurd. It is nothing but "a form of

philosophical inquiry that explores the problem of human existence and centres on the subjective experiences of thinking, feeling, and acting”. (Macquarrie 11) It is related to several philosophers of Europe of the 19th and 20th century who shares an emphasis on the human subjects—meaning, purpose, and value of human existence— despite their profound differences in thoughts, ages, and countries. This garland of ‘ism’ that has been spreading its fragrance for centuries is made of bloomed flowers like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Sartre, Camus, Heidegger, Beauvoir, Jasper, Marcel, and Tillich. Existence precedes essence, the meaninglessness of life, purposeless of the birth, the absurdity of the cosmos, facticity, authenticity, the Other, and the look, angst, dread, and despair are the various linked yarns that make the possibility of the existence of this de-centred school of thoughts.

Existential crisis, which is closed to existential dread, vacuum, and alienation, is nothing, but the inner conflicts of the individuals which are characterized by the impression that life lacks meaning and purpose—i.e. life is meaningless and birth, purposeless. It depicts a few moments of deep questioning within oneself, usually relating to how someone sees oneself and one’s purpose within the world, which is gently absurd. For some thinkers, it stands for confusion about an individual’s identity and authenticity. Whatever it is, the fact is that it is followed by such anxiety and stress as often disturb one’s feelings, behavior, and functioning to such a degree that one falls victim to depression; consequently, one’s condition gets from bad to worse slowly-slowly day by day. One has to face life at the cost of the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral edge. Where emotional components are related to feelings, passions, or emotions of arising pain, despair, helplessness, guilt, anxiety, and alienation, their cognitive components, to the senses of life’s meaningless and to the loss of personal values, their behavioral components, to such manners and methods as deciding the ways of one’s functioning leading to addictions, anti-sociality, and compulsive. One who becomes its victim finds no interest in life. The persons, or things that were once near and dear to him/her, become far hated. Each and every action one takes becomes harmful; step, cumbersome; night, endless; and day, hellish. One’s life becomes burdensome forever for these crises affect too badly the mind to govern the person’s physical and psychological cosmos. What John Milton, the blind Puritan poet, says, seems to be true here. He writes: “The mind is its own place and, in itself can make a heaven of hell or a hell of heaven” (Milton 217).

In psychology, the various aspects associated with existential crises are often divided into three components. Namely, they are emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components. Additionally,

based on the stages of life at what it (existential crisis) affects an individual's life span, is categorized into three groups—Teenage-Crises, Quarter-Life-Crises, and the Mid-Life-Crises. This categorization of existential crises is especially found in academic literature. Whatever it is, it is clear that the issues at the core of it differ from individual to individual, from stage to stage whether they are related to one's life or to one's personal development. It may remind to some scholars of Bloom's Taxonomy in which the objectives of educational learning are presented in cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains vis-à-vis.

As in physics, 'the Chaos Theory,' popularly known as the 'Butterfly Effect' affects the cosmos, the existential crisis also affects the cosmos of the individual variously whether it is annexed to one's emotion, or to one cognition, or one's behavior. Undoubtedly, Tess is its victim. Her condition is like Sybil who longs for death, continuously crying: "I want to die. / I want to die" (Eliot 75). Like Trishanku, she is hanging between the heaven and earth of life and death. This world to her is like the painting of Mona Lisa whose countenance looks sad to IIPenseroso, and happy to L'Allegro. When she recalls her past, which she has passed with Angel Clare, this world showers happiness on her, and when she feels her present without him, this world showers fire on her. Though all the mentioned contexts differ, they present her condition well. Her psychological as well as physiological state, proves it well.

The emotional component, which disturbs the affective aspect of an individual, is mentioned as the first aspect of existential crisis in psychology. It's the very component that is highly affected by existential crises. It is utterly based on such emotions as describing how an individual emotionally reacts in an inharmonious situation, and to what extent one feels about other correlated things and persons. It refers to such effectors as provoking feelings of emotional pain, despair, angst, dread, helplessness, guilt, anxiety, loneliness or alienation. In the case of Tess of d'Urbervilles, out of the three crises—Teenage Crises, Quarter-Life-Crises, and the Mid-Life-Crises—the first and the second one play vital role despite having a common conflict about the meaning and purpose of one's life. The first two crises tend to be more forward-looking, while the third is backwards-looking. When it is gone through the poem "Tess's Lament," it is found that Tess is the name of the heroine of Thomas Hardy's novel, Tess of the D'Urbervilles—A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented, which is called 'Tess' in short. The poem in six stanzas is a lament by her (Tess) in which she deplores her life's unhappiness and the cruel destiny destined to her. Here, she recalls her past happy-happy love affair, which she has passed with Angel Clare, and she bewails his desertion as well. Despite

of it, she does not blame him for leaving her in the lurch and forsaking her. On the contrary, she takes all the blames on herself. She wants to be forgotten entirely without thought of or remembering her existence in this world. This incident of her life provokes her so severely and bitterly that she becomes a victim of emotional pain, despair, angst, dread, anxiety, alienation, and helplessness, i.e., she falls in the grip of the emotional component of existential crisis. Owing to her brooding existential crisis of emotional affect, her mind becomes the resting place of hovering pain and plaintive sorrow; brooding angst and coiling despair; endless anxiety and utter helplessness as well. This is the reason why she says:

I would that folk forget me quite,
Forgot me quite!
I would that I could shrink from the sight,
And no more see the sun.
Would it were time to say farewell,
To claim my nook, to need my knell,
Time for them all to stand and tell
Of my day's work as done. (Hardy 69)

It is nothing but the emotional effect that forces her to recall her past life. She recalls the dairy where she used to work. Where she used to sit with her spouse Angel Clare in the chimney seat where he used to hear her heartbeats and whispered words of love. Recalling all this consciously, she says:

Ah! Dairy where I lived so long
I lived so long;
Where I would rise up staunch and strong,
And lie down hopefully.
'T was there within the chimney-seat
He watched me to the clock's slow beat-
Loved me, and learnt to call me sweet,
And whispered words to me. (Hardy 69)

When the acid test of this poem is performed with the help of the touchstone of effective component of the aspect of existential crisis, it is found that it describes the way how Tess reacts emotionally, what she feels, and to what extent she feels other persons or things who or

which surround her. When it is read between the lines in both the poem (Tess's Lament) and the novel (Tess of the d'Urbervilles)) as well, it is found that her emotional reactions are the result of her pensive experiences which she feels in response to the happenings which happened in her past life when she was with Angel Clare, or to situations in which her existence survives. The type of emotion she experiences is determined by the circumstance she is lingering on. It triggers her emotions ceaselessly. For instance, her recalling the past moments she spent with Angel gives her joy, while the present circumstances in which she is residing give her the feeling of angst, fear, alienation, and helplessness. Owing to this, she feels the existential crises that make her emotionally push to the edge of her life. Consequentially, she utters:

It wears me out to think of it,
To think of it;
I can not bear my fate as writ,
I'd have my life unbe;
Would turn my memory to a bolt,
Make every relic of me rot,
My doings be as they were not,
And gone all trace of me! (Hardy 70)

It is nothing but emotional effects which distort her sweet memories of the past, little good feeling of the present, and a few upcoming golden rays of the thoughts of the future disturbing her peace of mind, the tranquillity of her heart, and mobility of the body, i.e., it affects her body, her thoughts, her feelings, and her behaviour as a whole. Changes in her personality, changes in her mood swings, changes in her likelihood, and changes in her vibe are also affected by it. It distorts the little positive life vibes she has. No doubt, a man with stormy emotions and passions is a man with existential crises. She is no exception to it.

The cognitive component, which disturbs the affective domain of an individual, is mentioned as the second aspect of existential crisis in psychology. Including beliefs, perceptions, and judgments about an object or experience, it encompasses the problem of meaninglessness and purposelessness of an individual's life along with the loss of personal values, and reflections about one's morality besides compulsive behavior as well. When the poem "Tess's Lament," is read between the lines, it is found that cognitive components also disturb the peace of her mind. To her, life becomes without any particular meaning and purpose. Due to it, her

compulsive behaviour, ethics, and morality are utterly changed. Even though Angel Clare made her life chaotic and cathartic, she takes all the blame over her own self. This is why she utters:

And it was I who did it all,
Who did it all;
'T was I who made the blow to fall
On him who thought no guile.
Well, it is finished— past, and he
Has left me to my misery,
And I must take my cross on me
For wronging him awhile. (Hardy 70)

It is another thing that time and coincidence make her life cathartic, her ways tragic, and her path thorny, but she does not blame Angel for it. There are many moments in her life when irrational and negative thoughts surge into her mind and lead her into much more misery, frustration, and guilt. She pines for her lost love which has made her lovelorn. Victorian social convictions are also responsible for her plight—existential crises. Going through the novel, it is found that Angel symbolizes society with its all conservatism and its double standards—one for a man and the other for a woman, as well as one for the rich and the other for the poor, while Tess symbolizes such individual as becomes its victim despite of her talent, her wisdom, her sensitivity, and her passion. Her desire to be forgotten completely is nothing but the result of an existential crisis that is related to her psychological state. Her tiredness of life, her inability to do any deed, and her tranquil soul tell the tale of such existential crises as affect her cognitive domain out and out.

Additionally, as in the novel, her passivity renders her responsible for her suffering. She is “asleep, or in reverie, at almost part of the plot” (Hardy 121) Her perceptions, beliefs, and her judgments are struggling with the habit of unproductive negative thought cycles, which seem to be out of her control utterly. These cycles and patterns of negative thinking are not new to human beings. They have existed for ages and ages. None can escape from it. Tess is not an exception. She is utterly disturbed by it. Her mood, her vibe, and her force are all by herself. Her judgment about life and the world also makes her feel that life is meaningless and purposeless. She recognizes the absurdities of life and the world, she accepts the befalling misery; she tries to resolve all the oddities of her life as much as she can; and in the end, she endeavors to come over all the rationally-irrational thoughts which arise in the cosmos of her

mind and psyche. The confrontation between her desires and the indifferences of the world makes her pessimistic and lovelorn even though the victim of existential crises.

‘As potter, so is pot’— can’t be denied in Thomas Hardy’s novels and verses. The world knows that characters be it of a play, or fiction are nothing, but the incarnation of the writers (Author-Gods) concrete or abstract physique. They are MANASPUTRA (mind-born/mind children). Writers’ feelings, emotions, perceptions, and incidents related to their life cause their birth on the earth of their works. Such is with Tess and Hardy. This is the reason why Ram ji Lal pens:

Hardy’s poetry does express convictions, even as his novels had done. If an impression is repeated again and again, whether in novels or in poems, it acquires the force of conviction; and so Hardy’s poems do convey some of his beliefs the chief of which is that life has more of sorrow than of joy to offer to human beings. In one of his novels, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Hardy said that happiness was an occasional episode in the general drama of pain in this world; this is the view that the bulk of his poetry also express (Hardy 21).

A Japanese proverb states that only staying active will make you want to live a hundred years. But how can a person like Tess remain active, when she has nothing except negative vibes of life. She has more sorrow than joy in her mind and soul. The happiness that she gets with Angel is nothing but an occasional episode in the painful drama of her life.

Next comes the behavioural component, the third aspect of existential crisis in psychology. The very component of the existential crisis disturbs an individual's behaviour. How it affects an individual is expressed well with the help of the succeeding words. “Behaviorally, existential crises may express themselves in addictions and anti-social behavior, sometimes paired with ritualistic behavior, loss of relationships, and degradation of one’s health” (Existential crisis Wikipedia Jolanta Sodaite). Its effect is so bad for an individual that it leads them to isolation and detaches from social interactions. The surges of negative thoughts in the mental cosmos of the person lead even though to a suicidal condition. When the poem “Tess’s Lament” is read between the lines, it is found that the existential crises affect her behavior badly. She looks before and after and pines for what is not. She recalls:

How gay we looked that day we wed,
that day we wed!
‘May joy be with ye! They all said
A- standing by the drun.
I wander what they say o’ us now,
And if they know my lot; and how

She feels who milks my favourite cow,
And takes my place at churn! (Hardy 70)

Happiness is often momentary. It is nothing but nine days' wonder. Tess is not an exception. Her joy seems like a bubble that goes off within a moment. All her hopes and dreams are shattered into pieces like a glass. Shattered are her mind and soul. Her behaviour—manner and method of life—utterly changes. She always feels to be at stake. Leading a disoriented perplexed life, she seems to be reached at the edge of the profound philosophical problem—suicide. This is why she says: “I would that folk forget me quite” / “And no more see the sun”/ “Of my days work has done” (Hardy 69). She is so confused that she takes all the blames of her miser on herself saying: “And it was I who did it all / ’T was I who made the blow to fall” (Hardy, *The Works of Thomas Hardy with an Introduction and Bibliography* 69). Such condition of hers reminds P.B. Shelley’s “To a Skylark,” where he versifies:

We look before and after,
And pine for what is not;
Our sincerest laughter with
Some pain is fraught. (Shelley 85-88)

Through Skylark’s song which describes man’s predicament, Shelley says that human beings are naturally pining for the past and future rather than the present. Whatever they feel is impure and unavoidable. Since Tess is mortal, she also pines for the past. It turns her life’s laughter into weighted pains and pangs. What William Shakespeare, the Bard of Avon, writes about man’s destiny in “King Lear”, is also applicable to her case. He writes: “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport” (Craig 463). Something like this, Thomas Hardy also writes: “The president of the immortals has ended his sport with Tess” (Hardy 546).

To conclude, it can be said that existential crisis, which is usually seen as a complex phenomenon, is at the crux of psychology consisting of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components. In the text of the poem “Tess’s Lament” as well as in her (Tess’) personal context, the psychological praxis of existential crises plays a crucial role. It has become a part of her “lived experience through a cycle of action-reflection-action” (Hardy 70)

Firstly, she feels; secondly, she perceives; and lastly, she acts. Whatever she does leads her to the unpleasant experiences of despair, loneliness, and helplessness; brims her with the sense of the lack of meaning and purpose in life; and detaches her from the social interactions disturbing

the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of her existence and essence. “To be or not to be, —that is the question.” (Craig 55) is before her eyes of the mind and soul. Crises of meaning, whether related to the meaning of life, the cause of birth, or the purpose of life, nettle her. Her compulsive behavior tries to lead her toward suicidal thoughts. Trapped in the trap of existential crises and always facing Murphy’s law, Tess is a Tess is a Tess is a Tess.

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