



TESS OF DURBEYFIELD AND ABSURDITY OF LIFE: AN EXISTENTIALIST LENS

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ABSTRACT

The present article attempts to study Thomas Hardy's Character Tess of Durbeyfield through the lens of Sartre's Existentialism as discussed in his most popular book *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. This paper makes an effort to throw light on the treatment of Tess of Durbeyfield by her parents, men and society. To begin with, starter's views are delineated and then the loss of connection between external and internal connection due to too much interference from external sources in the life of Tess of Durbeyfield. She remains in constant frustration and struggles in her life to fight the absurdity and meaninglessness in her life. she was able to understand the causes of her failure in her efforts at achieving harmony between external and internal self, therefore, she finally decides and chooses to suffer from pain and inward torment rather than taking refuge in the false self that is you are too weak ever to leave and chisel self respect and identity in this world of so called social constructs.

Key Words: Absurdity; Hopelessness; Existence; Nothingness; Essence

INTRODUCTION

Tess of D'Urbervilles is the most famous novel of Thomas Hardy, which many researchers have focused from feminist angles; resilient woman, nature vs. civilization, fate and free will. But the current study's main objective is to present critical analysis of the same through different angle which brings forth an interpretation of this classic novel's female protagonist from Sartre's existentialist point of view. In this novel, the critical thinkers can feel that Tess stands spilt between spirit and matter. And she awards essence to her existence through her relentless efforts of understanding the Sartre's concept of radical freedom and consequently surrendering to anguish and being in itself is the real purpose of life. She throughout the novel keeps struggling to let her inner self dominate the worldly desires or materialistic ends. In the end, the suicide of Tess and the transmission of her spirit into LizaLu is an effort on her part to establish herself as a true and a pure woman which means she finally gave essence of a pure woman to her existence. The murder of Alec is the murder of materialistic self and appearance of LizaLu is a rebirth of a natural spirit which is the essence of her existence through her existentialistic efforts.

JEAN PAUL SARTRE'S EXISTENTIALISM

Jean Paul Sartre is known as one of the most leading and highly influential figure in the time era of 20th century. He was by origin a French philosopher and as a philosopher he preferred to explore the issues of life in the perspective of existentialism. His perspective on life got published in his world famous book titled as *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* published in 1943. His discussion in this book is divided into following core points: existence precedes essence; radical freedom; being in itself; being for itself; nothingness and anguish (Ramzan et al., 2023; Ramzan and Khan, 2024).



CRITICAL OPINION ON TESS OF D'URBERVILLES

The critical opinion about Tess was mixed; it ranged from highest praise to deepest contempt. One of the critics in *Anthenaeum* was of the opinion that Hardy's Tess is "a credible, sympathetic creature." Another critic in *Times* said: "Tess is Hardy's effective criticism of Victorian moral standards". John Holloway in 1963 evaluated Tess "as repeated identification of Tess with a hunted animal and a Darwinian vision that takes Tess, much like a developing species, from formation through adaptation, to ultimate extinction." Another critic Dorothy Van Ghent in 1953 wrote: that "in the accidentalism of Hardy's universe we can recognize the profound truth of the darkness in which life is cast, darkness both within the soul and without" (P.427). Martin Seymour Smith concludes in his book titled as *Hardy* in 1994 that "Tess was a woman who stabbed her husband then, as now, in the eyes of most judges, there is one law for men who kill their wives, and quite another for women who kill their husbands. Tess and her pitiful treatment by the men in her life are at the core of discovering the true importance of the work. "And the question raised by the novel is this: "what would a woman be if she were released from male oppression and allowed to be herself" (P.34)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Silverman (1993) notes that in research there are two paradigms: qualitative and quantitative. In qualitative paradigm the research is conducted through steps of interpreting, discussing and explaining the data, whereas in quantitative paradigm the relationship between two variables is seen in form of numbers. In the light of this above opinion, the present study relies on the data available in the form of text that is the novel *Tess of D'Urbervilles*; therefore it is qualitative in nature. The researcher has selected the text of the novel and then separated certain paragraphs, sentences and dialogues to analyze *Tess of Durbeyfield* through the lens of Sartre's existentialism. The researcher also uses other books, research articles, and internet pages as secondary source of data.

FINDINGS

HARDSHIPS, ANGUISH AND QUEST OF TESS OF DURBEYFIELD

Tess of D'Urbervilles is a novel of character and environment written by Thomas Hardy in 1891 in Victorian age of industrial progress, colonial expansion and multiplication of material wealth. It is a story of the fallen woman's true love, the pain and hardships of her life and her fight with the society, family, nature, religion and with Alec the Evil.

Tess was the daughter of Jack Durbeyfield who was very irresponsible, light hearted, and negligent and a man of meager resources, who kept building castles in the air that he is from noble lineage. And as such because of Tess's parents such attitude she at the age of 17 years, due to the death of their dear horse named as prince which was quite unintentional, left her home at vale of Black, Marlott and leads towards the palace of Mrs. D'Urbervilles whom her parents think to have lineal linkage somehow and believe that Tess will bring back their past glory by winning the heart of Mrs. D'Urbervilles. This rich lady had a son named as Alec who was from head to toe a man of lust and luxury. Tess as an innocent freshness becomes the target of Alec's seductive eyes and as such he keeps pressuring her for illegal relationship with him. And at one place where she goes to Chaseborough on an excursion where she had a tussle with other ladies which gets so worst that Alec saves her grace and by taking advantage of that opportunity of Tess being all alone at his mercy he successfully seduces her and fulfills his lust finally. Tess after losing virginity becomes no more maiden and curses her parents for sending her to such a place where she lost her purity out of wedlock. At this stage Angel Clare who had seen her somewhere in may dance festival at Marlott vale, comes in her



life and leaves his luxurious life to win up her heart, which finally results in a proposal to her which he agrees after a great persuasions. On the day of marriage, Tess after listening to the past confessions of Angel Clare, shares her past secret of losing her virginity to Alec an evil man who after seducing her disappeared and left her in the lurch. Angel Clare after listening to this truth leaves her to the point of no more return and she keeps struggling to find where he left to and finds disappointment wherever she goes. Finally, Tess meets again with Alec who has become a priest and propagates the message of God to common people. When Tess finds this aspect of Alec she forgives him his past wrongdoings, but this man is still the same evil because he asks Tess to live a life of his mistress and enjoy the fruits of his company, on this Tess becomes a very brave woman and kills him with knife putting an end to her pain, guilt and suffering forever. In the end Tess is hanged, and Angel Clare at his return finds Tess no more but his sister Liza Lu as a spiritual version Tess.

DISCUSSION

PLIGHT, RICADAL FREEDOM, NOTHINGNESS AND ANGUISH OF SARTRE'S PHILOSOPHY AND THE CHARACTER OF TESS OF DURBEYFIELD

Tess was an embodiment of beauty and nobility. And as such throughout the whole novel we see that she maintains her beauty and nobility in her every action. She is the daughter of irresponsible parents; she falls victim to the seductive eyes of Alec; she gives birth to a weak child out of wedlock; she loses her true love owing to the male vanity of Angel Clare; she again regains the spirit of life just to lose it again at the exploitative hands of Alec in the gown of priesthood; she becomes a murderer and as such she stands as an embodiment of pain, of guilt, of suffering, of social injustice, of victim to destiny. But, through all this we find that Tess is a constant fighter she keeps fighting in every sphere of her life as we find in the following lines from text:

He made love to me, as you said he would do; and he asked me to marry him, also just as you declared he would. I never have liked him; but at last I agreed, knowing you'd be angry, if I didn't. He said it must be private even from you, on account of his mother; and by special license; and foolish I agreed to that likewise, to get rid of his pestering. I drove with him to Manchester, and there in a private room I went through the form of marriage with him as before a registrar. A Few weeks after, I found out that it was not the registrar house we had gone to, as I had supposed but the house of a friend of his, who had played the part of the registrar. I then came away from trantridge instantly, though he wished me to stay and here I am. (p.247)

Thus whatever has happened in the life of Tess is unjust. She is punished for unintentional death of prince; she is being punished for her rape by Alec; she is being punished for being unmarried mother of weak child; she is being punished for telling the truth to Angel; she is being punished for killing her rapist and she is being punished for being a woman of courage, determination and self identity. She rejects Christian rules and stands in disobedience to Victorian ideals as a rebellious force in the face of all sorts of odd. Tess of Durbeyfield this behavior implements the concept of radical freedom by Sartre in which he believes we are condemned to live, or all human beings are condemned to be free. And if we are condemned to be free as Sartre's notes in his book *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* published in 1943, where he even notes further that all individuals even in restrictive situations enjoy absolute freedom to choose their response and are responsible for their choices and meaning they create in their lives. This view of Sartre is exactly reflected in this statement of Tess of Durbeyfield

If-if- it were to be done again. I should do the same (Hardy, 2008, P.301)



This above stance by Tess of Durbeyfield shows her voluteerarly surrender to the concept of Radical Freedom and supports this core feature of existentialist thought that as a person we should embrace that condemnation happily and through this condemnation, pain and anguish chisel out the essence of our existence and this is what Tess of Durbeyfield has done to her life. She happily lives her condemned life and through living life of meaninglessness she draws a meaning for herself and enjoys her pain, torment and absurdity to full. And this view of creating a meaning from nothingness is further very clear from her this statement:

I don't believe in anything supernatural (Hardy, 2008, P.375)

As Hardy himself concludes “Justice” was done, and the President of the immortals as in Aeschylean phrase had ended his sports with Tess. And the d’Urbervilles knights and dames slept on their tombs unknowing. The two speechless gazers bent themselves sown to the earth as if in prayer, and remained there a long time, absolutely motionless: the flag continued to wave silently. As soon as they had strength they arose, joined hands again, and went on.” (Hardy, 2008)

Conclusion:

In the light of above analysis the present discussion may precisely point out that Tess of Durbeyfield first suffered because of choices of others imposed on her such as her parents and the men who appeared in her life at different critical stages of life. A critical analysis is the central point in making meanings (Pathan et al, 2024). Tess of Durbeyfield was made to leave her home against her own choice, and further she was sent to D’Urbervilles by her parents as to materialize their dream of becoming noble and see their daughter as a wife of Alec, who in fact was totally against the wish and will of Tess. Secondly, Tess after being raped by Alec gives birth to a child and constantly gets manipulated by her rapist time and again. Thirdly, she reveals her guilty past to her husband angel who though after many promises of faithfulness remains at heart a traditional man who would never accept the stained character of a woman whatsoever. In the face of such challenging circumstances, Tess of Durbeyfield decides to fight with the existing absurdity of her life and accepts all these above occurrences as her own choices and decides to take responsibility for all that she is condemned to live and also takes decision to flight not to freeze. She first tries her level best to get her illegitimate child an identity by visiting the church and coming in clash with the existing established norms of society and on the refusal of society she boldly herself keeps the name of child as a sorrow; secondly, she comes out of the dread of death and thinks it as a natural part of life. Thirdly, in her struggle to liberate herself from the established norms, Victorian ideals and to give a meaning to her life even in the face of all existing odds; Tess of Durbeyfield comes in direct clash with the perpetrators of misery and puts an end to her suffering by murdering the very person who has been the cause of her whole agony. The study considers this stance of the Tess of Durbeyfield to implement the rule of anguish where pain is internalized like the character of Sisyphus who takes the punishment of adjusting rolling stone at the top of hill as his responsibility and enjoys his this responsibility which rather creates jealousy in the hearts of those who awarded this punishment to Sisyphus. Thus, Tess of Durbeyfield, as a woman of courage and existentialist thought, makes meaning of her absurd life through her quest and hardships and broke the idols of Victorian vanity.



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