



Philosophy in the Novels of Thomas Hardy

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ABSTRACT: The objective of this article is to highlight the philosophy in Thomas Hardy's novels. Hardy is regarded as the greatest novelist in English literature. He has written about two dozen novels in which he has presented his philosophy, which is not seen in other novelists. Pessimism, regarding Hardy, is indeed the bitter fact of life, love, fate, chance, society, and the world. 'Happiness is, but an occasional episode in the general drama of pain.' Hardy abjured the current sentimental attitude to life, love, and religion in his novels. Man's predicament in the universe is the theme of Thomas Hardy's novels.

Keywords: Happiness, love, life, pessimism, society, pain, woes and sorrows, philosophy of life, religion, and Fate, the role of chance or circumstances.

Introduction: Thomas Hardy is regarded as the greatest modern novelist in English literature. He has written about two dozen novels in which he presented the philosophy of life. Broadly speaking it can be said, according to the ideas presented in his novels, 'happiness is an occasional episode in the general drama of pain. He believed that man is a puppet at the hands of fate or chance or circumstances – man is a helpless being and he is compelled to suffer for the entire part of life.

Hardy never believed that life is governed by two conscious and opposing forces that are good and evil as told in several scriptures. He also condemns Browning's belief, 'God is in heaven;

All is right with the world'. Hardy shows in several of his novels that a mass of men is content to live safely within a comfortable moral order. Hardy shows that man has to make the most of life by removing the obvious follies and abuses, without asking whether they can all be removed. He says shows that life conditioned in the world can be nice and happy, only when man will live it bravely and truly, and surrender nothing to the deserted ground.

Hardy also shows a world in which human individuality and desire are in a state of conflict with the different governing powers, but there is nothing to suggest his contempt for human will, endurance, and human passion practiced in the world. Hardy's distinctive gift is his double vision, 'littleness in greatness'. It means to say that when he finds the littleness, he sees also the greatness of life. He sees human life as futile and trivial when he watches infinity. When he looks out of the very heart of farmers or milkmaids, he finds human life heroically grand. He means to show that all may seem futile in the long run, but all are engrossing to the interest and compel admiration. The secret of Hardy's tragedy lies in the simultaneous consciousness of man's greatness and of man's futility. This is also the secret of humanitarian pity.

As mentioned said in the introduction, Hardy's philosophy of life is marked with a strong note of fatalism. 'Destiny is character' is portrayed in Hardy's novels. Hardy views man as a helpless creature – a mere puppet at the hands of Fate. Man in the world, according to Hardy, is unable to enjoy free will. All the actions of man are commanded by Fate with a view of intervening when it wants to do so. Thus, man is not free to pass his life in his manner. Hardy also reveals that obstacles and hindrances swarm on man's way of life and they dismiss all his hopes and desires. Man has to always struggle against these obstacles and hindrances. W.H. Hudson rightly observes, "*Jude the Obscure, the last novel, is more fatally injured by ruthlessness. At no time*

are Sue and Jude permitted to escape the shadowing hand of malignant destiny.” Hudson, W.H., 1986, *An Introductory History of English Literature*, B.I. Publications Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, page 268

The situation of man which he faces life long is at the hands of omnipotent and indifferent Fate. Man, obviously, has to struggle against these indifferent conditions in the entire part of life – and his struggle determines his character and nature. Hardy's conflict is portrayed in most of his works that show one man to another – sometimes, between man and an institution. Hardy portrays man conditioned in his Fate. Most importantly, the characters in his novels are aware of this fatal condition. For example, in *'The Mayor of Casterbridge'*, Henchard is obsessed with the hatred of Donald Farfrae – in *'Far from the Madding Crowd'*, Bathsheba looks on Troy as the agency of her misfortunes. Bathsheba and Henchard are seen to be under a delusion. They feel that their rivals are also the puppets at the hands of Fate like them.

Fate is an agency responsible for the suffering of man in his entire part of life – also untimely responsible for their quarrels and miseries. When they were destined to live happily, no distinction came and lived happily – later, they quarrelled due to their destiny and embrace miseries. Fate commands all of Hardy's characters. So, his leading characters divide themselves into instruments for good and for evil. This is determined by their attitude to themselves. All alike are striving for happiness, whereas Eustacia or Fitzpiers, and Arabella strive with selfish passion. On the other hand, Tess and Gabriel, and Giles have the intention to sacrifice their own happiness. But all of them are at the hands of Fate and they play only their role. Thus, Fate is the main agency portrayed in Hardy's novels which governs all mankind and man is a puppet at its hands. W.R. Goodman rightly observes, *“As some of his title suggest, they, like the novels, reveal*

concern with man's unequal struggle against an overwhelming fate, and if they seldom echo the bitter accusations of his novels, many of them are deeply felt." Goodman, W.R., 1994, *A History of English Literature II*, Doaba House, Delhi, page 488

Fate is not alone, it has different agencies. Chance and love are its agencies too. Chance has been very typically portrayed in his novels. In some of his novels, chance exercises such a conspicuous influence on the course of events. This is the reason that Hardy has been blamed by some critics. The fact is that sometimes, he overdoes it. But if one his use of chance is misunderstood, it becomes difficult to know his view of life. Sampson rightly observes, "*A complete fatalist, from the first movement of his novels to the last workings of destiny in The Dynasts, Hardy saw 'man' living, loving, labouring, and perishing against a background of a remote, indifferent implacable forces themselves unconscious and uncontrolled. He seemed drawn to the darker side of truth, and appeared to turn the balance against hope, because his artistic veracity, forbade him to propagate delusions about a happy issue out of human afflictions.*" Sampson, *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, page 655

Very commonly, said in every sphere by the common people that life is the name of struggle. *Srimad Bhagwad Gita* also reveals this fact in different verses. Life is indeed a battle between man and destiny. Destiny is an inscrutable force. We do not understand the nature of its intentions. It is also therefore too difficult to predict its role or its force at a particular time. Its acts always show themselves in the guise of inexplicable, unexpected blows of chance. Hardy's faith in a determination by Fate, makes him a pessimist. Veda Vyasa rightly shows in *Srimad Bhagwad Gita* in the following verse:



karmaṇy-evādhikāras te mā phaleṣhu kadāchana

mā karma-phala-hetur bhūr mā te saṅgo 'stvakarmaṇi

Literal translation, Chapter 2, Verse 47, *Srimad Bhagwad Gita* by Swami Ramsukhdas, Gita Prakashan, 1998, Gorakhpur, page 80

Srimad Bhagwad Gita obviously shows that man's duty is to continue his duty expecting no fruits. He is not entitled to get its fruits. 'Man' should never consider himself to be the cause of his prescribed duty. This indirectly indicates that there is nothing in the name of the fruits of his duty. Thus, duty is not the cause of man's happiness or suffering. Rather he is compelled to suffer because of indifference to Fate which governs all activities of the world.

Broadly known, all of Hardy's novels portray a gloomy view of life. What happens next is always gloom. But Hardy has tried to show that his views toward life are not pessimistic. Albert Eliot remarked, "...it appears certain that he was not conscious of the extent to which his interpretation of life and its problems was leading him into the field of pessimism." He finds no glory in life – he finds little chance of happiness in life – he finds no perfection – and finally, he shows that man is the slave of chance or circumstances. Hardy shows men and women as snatching at happiness, striving to express and fulfil themselves. He also sees human beings breaking themselves into power that takes no heed to them. We know that our life is very short, but the world is very old having different cultures, customs and rituals, and activities. Wessex's people and their rituals are portrayed in Hardy's novels, which constitutes Hardy's gloomy view of life that leads to pessimism. Hardy, very clearly, portrays the significance of man in the world of Fate, and the briefness of man's life. Man does so many things in his interests, but his life is too short and in this short life he is under the realm of Fate and chance. He is quite unable to use

his will freely, rather than Fate. Fate continues to look at him very attentively and when the time as per his expectation comes the situation becomes quite against him and he is compelled to suffer. Tajindar Singh rightly observes, “*Hardy believed in the presence of a malignant power which sometimes indifferent to human beings and sometimes actively bent upon frustrating their plans and running them. His novels like Tess, The Mayor of Casterbridge, and Jude the Obscure are only practical illustrations of his pet theory.*” Singh, Tajindar, 1988, *History of English Literature*, Students Store, Bareilly, 622

Hardy creates an imaginary world in his novels portraying the role of chance which leaves a note of pessimism in his works and tries to portray it as a real world. According to him, life is a bitter struggle for existence among men as among beasts and birds, plants and trees. Hardy portrays that man is keenly alive to thwarted desire, unsatisfied longingness, undeserved sufferings, and conflict of duties. He also portrays that man has broken commandments, disappointments, and disillusionment, high and noble aspirations ending in misery. Thus, life has a chance of little happiness in the general and broad drama of pain.

Hardy portrays the gloomy view of life broadly in *Tess D'urbevilles*. Hardy reveals that children are born where they are not wanted to present several children of the poor and feckless. They are forced into the world without their having been asked 'if they wished for a life on any terms when they only embrace sufferings in Durbeyfield.' Hardy, very ironically, presents them as passengers on Durbeyfield ship. There is the broadest government in the world, in which we find bankruptcy all around. There is starvation, disaster, difficulty, disease, degradation, or death all around us. The world government fails to handle and command it properly. Its picture has been very broadly presented by Hardy in *Tess D'urbevilles*. In this world, there is a perpetual hide-

and-see between man and Nature. It continues till life becomes an irksome, outworn game. Man and woman wander about the earth, like two halves of a perfect whole. Hardy reveals, ‘everyone waits in cross obtuseness for the missing counterpart and out of this maladroit sprang anxieties, throughout disappointments, catastrophe and passes strange destinies which he ever expected’. He says that man will never come out of this state which he presently witnesses.

We have several beliefs, ideologies, lessons, and preaching, and is said that to follow all this for a happy life. Man is told to follow the righteous path of life for a happy life. But in spite of all this, man is compelled to suffer due to his destiny. There is not any way to follow in which man witnesses only joy, no sorrows. We use our knowledge for a happy life but it is also a failure on the ground of destiny and chance. Hardy has presented a very living picture in *Tess D’urbevilles*. Hardy says that the knowledge gained by Tess through better experience is also a failure. Lastly, she learns what to do, but who would now accept doing it? Thus, knowledge is also a failure. Hardy also views the day of death. He says that it lies sly and unseen among all the other days of the year. Death gives no sign or sound when we annually pass over it.

Hardy believes that there is the government of the world which is commanded by the ministers as chance and Fate. Chance rules over the world. Fate rules over the world. And man’s life is insignificant. He has little belief in god. Thomas Hardy has very beautifully remarked, “I have been looking for god for fifty years, think that if he existed I should have discovered Him, as an external personality, of course, the only true meaning of the word.” Thus, Hardy was really a modern man in spirit. He seldom recognises God, and he was represented by scientific thoughts. It is also quite clear that Hardy is not an atheist. His view was never against God. He has tried to maintain a balance between worldly forces that are Fate and chance and the existence of God. In

most of the novels, his portrayal moves around chance and Fate, never for or against god. He had a staunch faith in the spiritual forces. Sampson rightly observes, *“Though he tells us, in Aeschylean phrase, that the President of the Immortals has ended his sport with Tess, Hardy had no belief either in Immortals or in President.”* Sampson, *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, page 655

Raghukul Tilak in his also agrees with their remarks of Sampson. He rightly observes, *“His novels are questionings about life. He constantly enquires about the why and whereof things and constantly attacks accepted beliefs. Man’s predicament in the universe is the theme of Thomas Hardy’s novels. He has no faith in the benevolent and omnipotent God of Christianity. He conceives of the first cause as blind indifferent and unconscious. Man suffers not owing to any fault of his but owing to the imperfections of the powers on high.”* Tilak, Raghukul, 1994, *A Short History of English Literature*, Prakash Book Depot, Bareilly, 208

Hardy's novels show that he has no sympathy for traditional Christianity or its theology or its forms of worship. He does not accept the doctrine of several punishments. He does not accept mysticism. He also rejects the doctrine of chastity which he based on the purity of the body and soul considered necessary for union with Christ. But Hardy finds no foundation of such beliefs in Nature. He has little sympathy for church attendance and he attacks church-goers. He believes that Nature is better than theology. According to Hardy, religion teaches men to make the curiously unnatural sacrifice of humanity to mysticism.

Hardy also views death. He means to say that there is a life after death where a man gets compensation for the sufferings to endure in this life. He says that happiness is in but an

occasional episode in the general drama of pain. So, death should be welcome as if is the end of all the sufferings of this life. He says that man should salute death with open arms as it frees him from the bondage of all earthly trials and tribulations in a world full of only material energy.

Hardy finds society most responsible for the sorrow and suffering in this material world. he says that man is naturally free from many evils but man-made laws conflict with the laws of Nature. Nature makes no difference between a bastard child and a legitimate child. He says that if there is a ban on an unmarried woman who gives birth to a child, but he is socially ruined, nature has no objection. So, society according to him is also unjust. In *The Mayor of Casterbride*, he portrays Elizabeth Jane as a flower of Nature. Life is indeed full of contrarious inconsistencies and Nature has jaunty readiness to support unorthodox social principles. But society is not ready in any manner to accept⁵ this natural fact. So, he says that society is unjust and should be neglected.

Hardy's novels are regarded as social novels. And they deal with such social problems as marriage, sex, motherhood, love, and chastity. His view is very clear here, and he says that all miseries lie in life from certain maladjustments in social life in which maladjustment in marriage plays the most important role. He has portrayed these themes in *Jude the Obscure* and *Tess D'urbevelles* which deal with the theme of marriage. He says that marriage is not an agency successful for sexual satisfaction but a step towards a higher kind of life. He declines hasty marriages. He says that it should take place after taking into account all things related to it. He also says that marriage based on love at the first sight is also seldom successful because it is based on sentiments. Sampson rightly observes, "*Hardy abjured the current sentimental attitude to life, love, and religion. His interpretation of existence is not a 'reading of earth' in the mystical*

Meredithian sense, but it is an interpretation of earthly facts.” Sampson, The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, page 655.

Conclusion:

Thus, it be said that Hardy is a great novelist in English literature. In his novels, he portrays various themes which are related to life, death, society, God, destiny, chance religion, fate, marriage, and many more. He dealt with all subjects very philosophically. So, we can say that his contribution to English literature is remarkable and the philosophy revealed in his works is unfathomable and never found in the works of any other writers.

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