



Existential Visions and Fictional Versions: A Comparative Critique of Thomas Hardy and Paulo Coelho's Selected Novels

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ABSTRACT

The article is an attempt to explore the representation of existential conditions by juxtaposing the selected novels produced by Thomas Hardy, the Victorian literary giant, and Paulo Coelho, a part of the contemporary global canon, with the objective to sharpen readers' understanding of various valences of the existentialist literary thought. Both fiction writers have depicted different dimensions of human existence extensively in their works. As the novelists have got prolific fictional yield on credit, the study has been delimited to the most representative of their works in terms of delineation of the existential ideas. As regards selection of the texts, Hardy's *The Return of the Native* (1999/1878) and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1998/1870) have been chosen, whereas *The Alchemist* (1993/1988) and *The Zahir* (2005) have been culled from Coelho's oeuvre (Coelho, 2005). Accordingly, these four novels have been used as the primary data for the study. Methodologically, the study is qualitative, textual, and comparative in nature. The conceptual approach is rooted in existentialist thought, therefore Warnock (1971) has been taken as the theoretical benchmark to regulate the analysis and the argument. The selected texts have been sifted through to outline the salient features of the existential visions of the novelists. The major findings of the study include the identification of the novelists' diametrically opposed visions and the contrasting versions as represented in the respective texts. Thus, the article facilitates understanding of the selected novels by placing Coelho as a foil for Hardy.

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1. Introduction

The existential challenges and prospects have always attracted the philosophical and literary consciousness and, therefore, theoretical treatises and fictional yields representing the ontological endeavours and ideas of the struggling humanity are enormous. Existentialism orientates, in Cuddon's succinct phraseology, the human consciousness to the "vision of condition and existence of man" (1999, p. 294). The predilection to portray various valences of human condition remains prevalent as a dominant literary discourse. Accordingly, as the trend transcends the ethno-linguistic and spatio-temporal boundaries, it stands one among the traditions that are at the heart of the comparative literary approaches.

Thomas Hardy and Paulo Coelho have been acclaimed as the novelists of high rank across the globe and their works have gained currency in academia. Therefore, their fictional yields need elaboration for better understanding of their philosophical outlooks. This article comparatively explains the existentialist fictional discourse by juxtaposing the selected widely acclaimed novels written by them. Hardy is one among the later Victorian writers and a part of the English canonical novelists. His peculiar pessimistic stance is pervasive throughout his fictional. The article approaches his two major works, (*Hardy, 1999*) and (*Hardy, 1998a*) to

outline his ontological ideas and philosophy of existence in the cosmic order. Onwards, throughout the article, the latter work will be abbreviated as *TRON* and the former will be phrased as *Tess*. The latter fictional narrative has been acclaimed a novel "unique in Hardy's fiction" (Harvey, 2003). Through Clym's tragic story, he portrays how the human life moves from prosperity to adversity. The novel depicts the characters — Clym, Eustacia, Clym's mother, and others — to be mere puppets suffering in the cruel clutch of the forces beyond their control. The other work, *Tess*, is ranked as one of "the greatest" (H. C. Duffin, 2000) in the novelist's rich fictional repository. The novel displays the same kind of tragic trajectory the human beings are made to move on. *Tess*, the central character, has been shown to be oscillating between various kinds of ordeals that, ultimately, bring her to her tragic death. Precisely, both of Hardy's narratives manifest his tragic vision and pessimistic outlook in a vociferous way.

On the other hand Paulo Coelho, the renowned Brazilian author, is taken as a foil to Hardy. Two of his philosophically loaded and critically acclaimed novels have been selected for the comparison: (*Paulo Coelho, 1993*) and (*Coelho, 2005*). *The Alchemist* has gained an unmatched acceptance and currency across the globe. An optimistic representation of Santiago's sojourn to pursue his dream is at the centre of the narrative. His exploration and enlightenment have been narrated with an explicit mystic touch and magical flavour. Likewise, *The Zahir*, is a story of hope and accomplishments that imparts hope. The protagonist stands successful in his endeavour to find his lost wife, Esther, who had disappeared. In addition, during the pursuit to find her, she turns to be his *Zahir*, "someone... [who] occupies our every thought" (Coelho, 2005). The mysterious experiences trigger his quest for self-realization that is attempted and achieved. Thus, both the narratives evince Coelho's optimistic worldview and hopeful propensity. Thus, the wisdom required to tread the tortuous path of life is oozing through the fictional narratives and, therefore, can easily be imbibed

The fictional narratives produced by Hardy and Coelho are philosophically loaded and, therefore, they demand a thorough scrutiny and critical comparison for an authentic interpretation. By capitalizing on the analyses and comparison of the four of the novels, two from each novelist, I contend relevance of the literary consciousness in the sphere of socio-psychological, philosophical, and existential affairs. The varying depictions of the various perspectives of the human condition are enlightening. The Objectives are as follows:

- To elaborate Thomas Hardy's vision regarding the existential dimensions as represented in his selected works.
- To explain Paulo Coelho's ontological thought with reference to his representative novels.
- To compare the visions of these novelists through their fictional works and expose the contrasting nature of their outlooks.

In this conceptual context, the article attempts to resolve the research questions essential for the accomplishment of the critique:

- What are the features of Hardy's existential vision found in the selected fictional works?
- In what ways has Coelho represented the valences of the human life in the selected novels?
- How does Hardy's depiction of human condition stand in diametrical opposition to Coelho's?

1.1 Delimitation

Both the novelists have produced prolific fictional yields and, therefore, to manage the ambit of the article, it is indispensable to delimit the focus by selecting representative works. Accordingly, following works have been selected for analysis;

1.1.1 Thomas Hardy

- The Return of the Native (1999/1878)
- Tess of D'Urbervilles (1998/1870)

1.1.2 Paulo Coelho

- The Alchemist (1993/1988)

- The Zahir (2005)

All the inferences and interpretations are based on critically analysis and systematic scrutiny of these fictional narratives. The argument has been substantiated references to the textual excerpts taken from these texts.

2. Literature Review

Sartre's study of human condition, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), theorizes different dimensions of existence and the prevalent predicament throughout the world (Sartre, 1993). The study covers all the essential postulates of existentialism: ranging from freedom to facticity. Sartrean idea of facticity stands for the impediments that restrict human freedom. The hurdles are multifarious in nature, ranging from the temporal issue of past to the phenomenon of death. The challenge of facticity is that "it poses a challenge to free will" (Khan, Amin, Iqbal, Yousaf, & Ahmed, 2020). Thus, Sartre's is the pivotal argument in the debates of existence and freedom. His credit is due to his contribution to the foundational discourses of the domain, that is, he has paved the way for existentialist thought of the future decades.

Flynn (2006) is pithy introduction of the key discourses in the field of existentialist philosophy and the resulting political thought. He masterfully phrases the gist of the philosophical paradigm by saying that they believe that "truth is more a matter of decision than of discovery". This encapsulates the subjective predilection of the philosophers of the field. The coverage of Flynn's study is inclusive—it covers various varieties found in the field. Thus, the work is a key to access the conceptual labyrinths of theorizations apropos existence.

Morais and Coelho (2009) offers a thorough description of Paulo Coelho's philosophy, personality, and contributions. Although the study's focus is biographical, it offers a comprehensive introduction of his vision of life, especially, as it has been depicted in his novels. He announces the reception and success of the novelist vociferously by asserting that the strictures coming from the critical circles could "not infect sales". Though the idiom of the book is explicitly journalistic, the content presented is authentic in terms of the biographical details and factual information.

Radford (2017) offers a unique approach towards the canonical works of the Victorian novelist, Hardy. It is an attempt to locate the themes regarding science and the scientific problems present in his works. As Hardy was temporally situated on the cusp between the Victorian and the modern times, the idea was science has to play its role in his fictional world. Thus, study is an interesting one with reference to its focal point.

Lakshmi and Mani (2018) engage with symbolic rendering of animals in Coelho's narratives. Having minutely analyzed the various symbols found in his texts, they assert that the animal are created to symbolically communicate "the experiences of his [human] characters" (Lakshmi & Mani, 2018). Thus, they have created a parallel between the animal and the human characters.

Kaya (2019) compares representation of the existentialist themes in Sartre and Topas's literary works. Different dominant existentialist dimensions present in both the texts have been brought to the surface and discussed rigorously. After elaborating the features of their ontological visions, Kaya claims that the works are "postmodern texts" (Kaya, 2019). So, the study is a cross-cultural comparison of the two of the acclaimed literary works.

Khan et al. (2020) approaches Hardy's fictional works to explore delineation of facticity that, in turn, causing the tragic failures in the lives of his characters. The study identifies certain existential aspects, as proposed by Sartre, and explain how these factors "curtail characters' sphere of action" (Khan et al., 2020). In short, the study foregrounds the malevolent working of the contextual and natural forces to obstacle human progress.

Billington (2021) has attempted to develop a comprehensive understanding of the existentialist ideas by creating a trans-geographical comparison, that is, he compares the traditional western views to those evolved in the east. There is an evidence of his subtle

perceptions in his placement of the ancient Hindu ideas and the Buddhist ideals vis-à-vis the modern western postulates about the dynamics of existence.

Subramanian (2022) is a psychological critique of Coelho's fiction that capitalizes on Alfred Adler's theorizations. It specifically focusses "the spiritual journey" of the protagonist to frame it in the context of the discourse of an individual's psychological development. Moreover, he posits that through depiction of Santiago's mobility, Coelho (2012) tries to symbolize the contemporary "mobile society" in which dislocation is an indispensable requirement for progress and prosperity. Thus, the argument of the article is a postmodern one in its essence.

Singh (2022) has attempted to negotiate the ontological issue of cosmic absurdity with reference to Hardy's most acclaimed classis *Tess of D'Urbervilles*. To develop his philosophical loaded argument, Singh engages with a perennial existential aspect, that is, the "confrontation between rational man and irrational cosmos" (2022, p. 46). He unpacks the absurdist dimensions that are pervasive across the narrative of suffering in which Hardy epitomizes the human predicament through delineation of the miseries of an innocent girl.

Welsh (2022) existentialist theorization orientates focus upon the different aspects regarding human body and the question of health in the contemporary times of the threatened existence. By doing so, she aims to evolve "an existential ethics" that accounts for tackling the problem of the self. The work is an inclusive critique of various significant perspectives regarding the central socio-psychological and existential issues. She ardently advocates ones readiness "to the new" if we have to cope with the problem of colossal and collective problems like "ambiguous condition".

3. Methodological Approach and Theoretical Framework

Methodologically, the study is purely qualitative and textual. The method of textual analysis, as outlined by Catherine Belsey in (Griffin, 2013), has been used for identifying the relevant thematic points from the selected novels. Furthermore, to compare and contrast the identified features, the technique of 'placing' is adopted: "the juxtaposing of texts in order to create new readings across cultures" (Bassnett & Bassnett, 1993). In this way, the methodological approach is twofold. Firstly, the conceptual patterns present in the novels have been unpacked. Secondly, the conceptual points inferred from the novels of both the novelists have been placed vis-à-vis to draw comparison. However, coverage of the textual analysis is limited only to the passages and parts that thematize the existential ideas and, therefore, the other thematic dimensions have not been explored or explained.

As the article aims to negotiate the questions regarding representation of human condition, the existentialist approach has been take as the theoretical framework. The existentialist philosophy is an appropriate paradigm for approaching what Siegbert Praver calls "perennial human problems" in (Basnett, 1993). The unifying pivotal point for all the existentialist thinkers is there concern for theorization of human condition. As Warnock (1971)precisely puts it: "They are all interested in the world considered as the environment of man". Accordingly, various existentialist aspects have been explored and the selected texts. For instance, the debate of *free will* in the domain of human actions holds a crucial place in the existentialist negotiations of life: "They [the existentialist philosophers] aim, above all, to show people that they are free" (Warnock, 1971). Likewise, various pertinent existentialist postulates have been invoked to explicate the textual material and develop a systematic comparative critique.

4. Analysis and Comparison of the Selected Novels

The selected works, Hardy and Coelho's, are the rich repositories of thematic perspectives, structural nuances, and stylistic features. However, as the article is focused on the existential visions of the novelists, only the points regarding depiction of human condition have been explored and placed parallel to draw a comprehensive comparison of their worldviews.

There is an explicit expression of the novelists' general views regarding the overall schema of human existence in this world. Hardy has categorically declared the life to be a path of miseries where the nature has set innumerable hurdles to frustrate humanity. At the outset of his *TRON*, Hardy's despairing ideas find way in the epigraph where he personifies sorrow

and claims that "she is so constant to me, and so kind" (Hardy, 1998b). The verses set the tone of the novel and communicate the gloomy outlook of the writer. Clym, the narrative's protagonist, pronounces the same reality with a deep sense of desolation when he observes that "the whole creation groaning and travailing in pain" (Hardy, 1998b). Clym's view of life is reflection of Hardy own and, therefore, pains and groans punctuate Hardy's tragic narrative. The world created in *Tess* consummately corresponds with this version. The novel is narration of, in Duffin's opinion, a fathomless "ruin" (J. Duffin, 2011). A poetic line provided by the novelist epitomizes not only Tess's plight but also mankind's predicament: "And the veil of thine head shall be grief, and the crown shall be pain"(Hardy, 1998b). These instances of expression of sheer despondency represent overall tenor of the texts and reflect the fatalist approach of the novelist.

Coelho's vision about the dynamics of existence and conditions of life is in sharp contrast with Hardy's. Melchizedek, the old wise king of *The Alchemist*, succinctly puts the essence of his vast experience to enlighten the protagonist, Santiago "And, when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it" (P Coelho, 1993). The pronouncement runs like a refrain throughout the novel to signify the significance of supportive role of the forces that control human life in the world. Santiago's optimistic frame of mind is another evidence of the message of hope communicated by the novel. Whenever there is a difficult situation or an ordeal, he exhibits proclivity of positive thinking and courageous behaviour. For example, on seeing his tortuous path through a vast desert he remains completely composed and positive to face the hardships for achievement of his goal. Instead of focusing the troubles awaiting him in the desert, the boy prefers "another way to regard his situation" (P Coelho, 1993). He interprets his situation by ignoring the desert and thinking that he was closer to his destination.

He pursues the prospects with hope and does not let fears and threats hinder his journey towards his destination. The optimistic approach remains intact also in the other novel by Coelho selected for the study, *The Zahir*. Here, the declaration of the benevolence of the universal forces is equally unequivocal: "the universe takes care of correcting our mistakes" (Coelho, 2005). There is a perfect correspondence between human efforts and natural forces' supportive interventions in the fictional world created by the Brazilian novelist.

The nature of human freedom and its ambit have always been a moot point. One view is takes the humans to be free agents have complete autonomy, whereas according to the other point of view the human beings are mere puppets being made to run by the natural forces. Hardy and Coelho's novels provide representation of these issues regarding free will and fatalism. Hardy's Eustacia Vye, in *TRON*, gives way to her extreme sense of frustration and belief regarding the unjust ruling forces: "I have been injured and blighted and crushed by things beyond my control!" (Hardy, 1999). She thinks that she could have accomplished many a marvel tasks if there had been no heavenly hindrances in her way to successes. She thinks herself to be capable and committed to achieve her goals and reach her destination. All of her failures are, accordance to her, merely due to the malevolent forces beyond her reach who maneuver to bring tragic ends to the human efforts. His Tess thinks likewise who has "begun to admit the fatalistic convictions" (Hardy, 1998b). This is a categorical indictment of the natural and supernatural forces that contrive together to bring disaster to the mankind, as Hardy envisions it.

On the other hand, Coelho's world offers his characters full freedom and agency to endeavour and accomplish. The characters are free to make decisions of their lives and achieve, in accordance with their level of competence, their goals. In *The Alchemist*, the wise old man emphatically puts his notion of free will while answering Santiago's question regarding a universal misconception. He says that not believing in free will is "the world's greatest lie" (P Coelho, 1993). The answer summarizes Coelho's optimistic vision apropos the nature of human agency and role of their willingly chosen courses of action in their lives. Coelho's protagonist of his *The Zahir* announces confidently at the outset: "I'm free, independent"(Coelho, 2005). His conviction in this regard is strong and unshaken. Therefore, he considers freedom to be the most precious characteristic of the human personality. Throughout the narrative he maintains his belief in his free will and keeps on pursuing his dream with courage and hope.

Love has always found a central place in all the discourses about the dynamics of human society. These two novelists have also depicted various shades and dimensions of the passion and sensation of love. In Hardy's narratives, the role of love is a destructive one, that is, the love affairs bring miseries and hardships to the lives of people. In *TRON*, to describe the devastating impact of the romantic relation between Clym and Eustacia, Hardy uses the following words like "the unreasonable nimbus" that will eventually result in their "misery" (Hardy, 1999). Similarly, the Wildeve-Thomison affair, as described in the novel, brings nothing but dissatisfaction and degradation to both of them. Even the pleasures of love are mingled with its pangs and pains. As Hardy has phrased it paradoxically, "a doleful joy" (Hardy, 1999). Also, Tess's misadventures are aggravated by her love life. Her marriage with Clare proves only to be a trigger for her tragic end. Retty and Marian become victim of tragic pangs of the "unrequited love" (Hardy, 1998b). Thus, role of love in Hardy's fictional world is devastation and the passion triggers only the tragedies. His characters suffer because they choose to chase their love.

However, Coelho's characters are found not only enjoying the luscious encounters ensured by the passion of love but also being facilitated by it. The passion of love reinvigorates them and creates the feeling of happiness and the sense of responsibility in them. Santiago, Coelho's protagonist in *The Alchemist*, feels "that his love for her [Fatima] would enable him" (Paulo Coelho, 1993) to pursue his aims and achieve his destination. In this way, his journey is not being deterred by his beloved but instead he imbibes the positive vibes to strengthen himself to bring the treasure to his beloved. She is equally supportive and inspires him to pursue his dream. She encourages him to keep on working hard to achieve his "goal" (Paulo Coelho, 1993) lest her love create a hindrance and distract him. In *The Zahir*, the novelist announces enthusiastically that the purifying passion of love "activates our intelligence" (Coelho, 2005). In the aphoristic expression he has attributed the creative power, enabling capacity, purifying power, and liberating influence to the passion of love. So, Coelho has beautifully associated creativity and potency with the idea of love.

One more of the existentialist dimensions that has been depicted by the novelists differently is the issue of self-realization. In all the selected novels the characters have been shown to be struggling for attainment of self-actualization. However, in Hardy's fictional world they meet disaster, whereas Coelho presents his character achieving the goal with grace and courage. In *TRON*, with a nativist urge and a philanthropic approach, Clym decides to sacrifice luxurious life at Paris and comes back to Egdon Heath, his native place: "I shall keep a school as near to Egdon (Hardy, 1999). He is a humanist and an idealist who prefers his dreams over the material gains. But the result of his idealism is a sheer shattering of dreams and, ultimately, a tragic life after deaths of the mother and the wife, Eustacia. Also, Eustacia's is an utterly tragic trajectory that is marked by failure and frustration. In the same manner, Tess tries to regain the lost grace of his family by reclaiming their relation with the noble D'Urbervilles. However, her journey towards restoration of their family status by regaining of the ancestral splendor turns to be an existential trap that leads her to a tragic death. In short, all of Hardy's major and minor characters in both the novels fail in their attempts to achieve the desired destinations.

Unlike Hardy's, Coelho's characters stand successful in their endeavours to achieve their destinations. In *The Alchemist*, Santiago is the symbol of self-realization and accomplishment. The words of a camel drivers spoken to Santiago are Coelho's message for his readers: "people need not fear the unknown if they are capable of achieving what they need and want" (Paulo Coelho, 1993). This is an unequivocal enunciation of the importance of the powers within all of the human beings. In the same vein, Esther's husband's words, in *The Zahir*, are enlightening: "before I could find her, I must first find myself" (Coelho, 2005). He thinks in this manner and he actually accomplish it before accomplishing the task of finding her lost love. Summarily, in both the novels, the characters are showing going after their ideals and materializing their dreams. This feature is in sharp contrast with Hardy's characterizations.

Hardy has created the narratives that do not conform to the literary tradition of creation of the ideal of poetic justice. In his works, good is seldom found bringing reward and the bad deeds invite no ramifications. In *TRON*, he explains the pattern of the skewed natural system that is premised upon utter kind of "inequality" and principle of "generosity before justice" (Hardy, 1999). He is disillusioned to the level of frustration when it comes to

realization of the asymmetrical relation between the human deeds and the consequences. Through delineation of the calamities striking Clym despite his pure soul and humanitarian approach, Hardy symbolizes the entire system that has engulfed the mankind. *Tess* is representation of the same sense of the lack of poetic justice in the world that is ruled by the forced beyond human control. When the innocent Tess meets her tragic end, Hardy's aphoristic voice renders his tragic sense as: "'Justice' was done, and the President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, has ended his sport with Tess" (Hardy, 1998a). The ironical 'Justice' consummately communicates the poignancy and sense of unwarranted circumstantial pressures. The nature of complaint against the mischievous powers is explicit and the feeling is excruciating.

Contrary to this, Coelho's Santiago sees all of his action bringing the desired fruition. Moreover, the old king's anecdote about the hardworking miner who was about to quit in frustration when the old man intervened and helped him. To facilitate the miner in getting his emerald, the old king "transformed himself into a stone that rolled up to the miner's foot" (Paulo Coelho, 1993). The anecdote is an expression of Coelho's belief that the nature never let anybody's hard work go unrewarded. *The Zahir* tells a story that follows the ideal pattern of poetic justice. Esther's husband keeps on striving to achieve his goal and he is rewarded with success. Coelho's ideas about the correspondence between human actions and their consequences is clear.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the texts and parallel placement of the existential thoughts present in the novels facilitate me to develop my argument by resolving the research questions and interpreting the findings. It has been made clear that Hardy's is a tragic vision of human condition. Life is a series of fiascos, the human being are mere puppets who lack agency, love is devastating passion, quest for self-actualization is an absurd attempt, the ideal of poetic justice is a poetic idea only—these are the regulating features of Hardy's existential vision. On the contrary, life in Coelho's world is marked by brightness and hope: the human beings are free to follow their dreams, love is a luscious and supportive passion, people have been shown to have reached the ideal of self-actualization, and a consummate system of poetic justice rules the world. The comparison of the ideas and ideals of both the novelists makes it clear that their views are in diametrical opposition. The irreconcilable ideas represent two different streams of philosophical approaches and literary consciousness vis-à-vis the nature of existential conditions. Thus, the comparative analysis the novelists' ideas has elaborated the widening gap between the ontological views about the human life and its various dynamics. The research also offers leads for the research prospects apropos the matters negotiated and debated in the study:

- The perennial existential questions can be engaged by juxtaposing various literary renderings of them. In this regard, different cross-cultural and cross-lingual comparisons can be drawn. Also, the writers from different times can be placed vis-à-vis to grasp the evolution of the existentialist thought.
- Thomas Hardy, like most of the great writers, remains relevant for our times. There is a potential for rereading his works from the vantage point of contemporary critical paradigms to relocate his canonicity and contribution.
- Paulo Coelho has ascended from being a mere popular novelist to place of the philosophically awake authors whose ideas address the burning questions of the testing contemporary times. Therefore, there is a dire need of theoretical engagement with his rich oeuvre.
- In short, the study not only develops a sound critique of the selected novels and draws a rigorous comparison thereof but also offers a few substantial points to trigger the critical forays in the field. The factors bespeak substance and, also, the significance of the critical appraisal accomplished in the study.

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