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THE POETICS OF EXISTENTIAL TRAGEDY IN THE FEMALE IMAGE: TESS AND ZEBI IN THE NOVELS OF THOMAS HARDY AND CHO‘LPON

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Abstract. The article offers a comparative analysis of two tragic heroines: Tess Durbeyfield in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and Zebi in Abdulhamid Cho‘lpon's *Kecha va kunduz* ("Night and Day", 1936). Using the comparative-typological method and the conceptual apparatus of existential philosophy (S. Kierkegaard's anxiety, K. Jaspers' boundary situations, A. Camus' absurd), the study identifies common elements in the poetics of existential tragedy in the two novels: the motif of innocence as a "blank page", the father who sells his daughter, the female body as a commodity, the boundary situation, guilt without intention and absurd justice, and the role of cosmic and symbolic imagery. The analysis shows that both writers transform the traditional plot of the "fallen" or "sacrificed" woman into a tragedy of an individual who becomes aware of herself in a world that denies her freedom. Differences in the two authors' treatment of fate, society and narrative voice are also discussed.

Keywords: existential tragedy, poetics, female image, Thomas Hardy, Cho‘lpon, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *Kecha va kunduz*, boundary situation, absurd, comparative-typological analysis.

Introduction

Thomas Hardy (1840–1928) and Abdulhamid Cho‘lpon (1897–1938) belong to different cultures, languages and historical epochs, and there is no evidence that Cho‘lpon knew Hardy's work. Yet their best-known novels share a striking similarity. In both, a young, beautiful and morally pure woman from a modest family is given to a powerful man against her inner will, loses control over her own life, becomes involved in the death of that man and is punished by the law. Hardy's Tess is hanged; Cho‘lpon's Zebi is sent into exile in Siberia, while her mother loses her mind. Both novels end not with reconciliation but with an image of loss.

Such similarities cannot be explained by direct influence. They belong to the sphere that V. M. Zhirmunsky described as typological analogies: similar literary phenomena that arise in different literatures when these pass through comparable social and cultural stages [14]. Late

Victorian England, with its crisis of religious faith and its rigid sexual morality, and colonial Turkestan of the 1910s, where the Jadid reformers questioned arranged marriage and polygamy, both produced a new artistic interest in the woman as an individual whose inner freedom conflicts with social norms.

The aim of this article is to show that this convergence takes the specific form of *existential tragedy*, that is, a tragedy in which the main conflict lies not only between the heroine and society but between the heroine's awareness of herself and a world that refuses to grant her meaning and freedom. The tasks of the study are: (1) to define the theoretical framework of existential tragedy; (2) to compare the key stages of the heroines' fates; (3) to identify common and distinctive features of the poetics of the two novels.

Literature review

Hardy's heroine has been the subject of intense critical debate since the novel's first publication. Victorian reviewers were shocked by the subtitle "A Pure Woman", and the novel had to be published in a censored form in *The Graphic* before it appeared as a book. Twentieth-century criticism moved from moral evaluation to the analysis of form and ideology. Dale Kramer examined the novel as a modern tragedy built on the structure of the heroine's inner life [10]. Mary Jacobus showed how Hardy's revisions of the text gradually "purified" Tess, making her more and more a victim and less an active agent [6]. Penny Boumelha argued that the contradictions of the novel reflect the contradictions of Victorian sexual ideology itself: Tess is at once presented as a natural, sensual being and as a moral ideal, and the narrative cannot reconcile these two images [1].

The study of Cho‘lpon's novel has a different history. For decades after the author's execution his name was banned, and *Kecha va kunduz* returned to readers only at the end of the 1980s. Since then Uzbek scholars have focused mainly on the novel's historical and political context, its criticism of the colonial system and its place in the Jadid tradition. O. Sharafiddinov's book *Cho‘lponni anglash* ("Understanding Cho‘lpon") laid the foundation for reading the writer as a tragic artist whose fate is inseparable from his work [11]. B. Karimov has studied the image of women in Cho‘lpon's short stories, showing that the questions of women's freedom and education run through the whole of his prose [8]. The English translation by Christopher Fort has made the novel available to international readers and opened the possibility of comparative studies [4]. However, a systematic comparison of Cho‘lpon's heroine with the heroines of Western European realism, and especially an analysis of the existential dimension of her tragedy, is still lacking. The present article attempts to fill this gap.

Theoretical framework and methods

Classical tragedy, as George Steiner argued, depends on a belief in a world order in which the hero's fall has a meaning that transcends him [12]. Modern tragedy, according to Raymond Williams, is closely connected with ordinary suffering, social disorder and the experience of people who are not kings or heroes [13]. Hardy's novels have long been read as an attempt to recreate tragedy in the world of ordinary rural people: Dale Kramer describes the variety of

tragic forms Hardy builds around characters who have little power over their circumstances [10].

The term *existential tragedy* in this article refers to a tragic structure in which three ideas of existential philosophy are artistically realised. The first is Kierkegaard's *anxiety*, the dizziness of freedom that a person feels when facing possibilities and the threat of guilt [9]. The second is Karl Jaspers' concept of *boundary situations* (*Grenzsituationen*): suffering, struggle, guilt and death, situations which cannot be changed or avoided and in which a person either discovers authentic existence or is broken [7]. The third is Albert Camus' *absurd*, the confrontation between the human need for meaning and justice and the "unreasonable silence of the world" [2]. Neither Hardy nor Cho‘lpon was an existentialist in the philosophical sense, but their heroines live through exactly these situations, and the narrative structure of the novels emphasises the absence of a just order behind their suffering.

The study uses the comparative-typological method, close reading of the texts and elements of feminist criticism, in particular Penny Boumelha's analysis of the relation between sexual ideology and narrative form in Hardy [1]. The Uzbek text is analysed in the original [3] and compared with the English translation by Christopher Fort [4]. For the Uzbek critical context, the works of O. Sharafiddinov [11] and B. Karimov [8] are used.

Analysis

1. Innocence as a "blank page". Both novels begin by establishing the heroine's innocence, and both writers present this innocence not as a moral virtue only but as a state of openness and vulnerability. Hardy's narrator, at the moment of Tess's seduction in the Chase, asks why on this "beautiful feminine tissue", "practically blank as snow as yet", such a coarse pattern was traced (Ch. 11) [5]. The image of a white page on which others write introduces the main motif of the novel: Tess's life is constantly "written" by other people — her parents, Alec, Angel, society — while her own will is hardly taken into account.

Cho‘lpon's Zebi is fifteen years old when the story begins. She is distinguished by her beautiful voice, and it is precisely her singing, heard by Akbarali mingboshi, that brings misfortune upon her [4]. This detail is deeply symbolic. Zebi's song is the only form of free self-expression available to a girl in a closed patriarchal household; it is the voice of her inner self. Yet this voice is turned into a reason for her "purchase". Thus in both novels the heroine's most natural and personal quality — Tess's beauty and vitality, Zebi's voice — becomes the instrument of her destruction. This is the first sign of an existential paradox: what makes the heroine an individual is exactly what society uses against her.

2. The name as a sign of fate. The heroines' names also carry a tragic meaning. "Durbeyfield" is a corrupted form of the ancient name "d'Urberville". The discovery of this noble origin at the beginning of the novel does not raise the family but destroys it: it feeds John Durbeyfield's vanity and sends Tess to the false "relatives". Tess is caught between two names: the peasant name that reflects her real life and the aristocratic name that symbolises a dead past and the sins of her ancestors. Hardy several times hints that the violence Tess suffers repeats the violence that her armed forefathers once committed against peasant girls. The past, therefore, acts as an impersonal force of fate.

The name Zebi is a short form of Zebinisa, a name of Persian origin meaning "the ornament of women". The name expresses the traditional ideal of female beauty and modesty, and in the context of the novel it becomes ironic: precisely because Zebi is the "ornament", she is treated as an ornament — an object that can be bought, displayed and possessed. In both novels the name, given by the family and the tradition, foreshadows the heroine's role in a world where she is not a person but a sign of family honour or of male desire.

3. The father and the "sale" of the daughter. The second structural parallel concerns the father. John Durbeyfield, having learnt that he is a descendant of the ancient Norman family of d'Urbervilles, becomes absorbed in vanity and drink. After Tess falls asleep while driving to market and the family horse Prince is killed, the girl, out of guilt, agrees to go to the wealthy "relatives" to "claim kin" [5]. Her parents secretly hope for a profitable marriage. Tess is therefore sent into danger by her own family, which treats her beauty as family capital.

In *Kecha va kunduz* the role of the father is even more direct. Razzoq so‘fi, a strictly religious man, at first refuses Akbarali's proposal because the mingboshi neither prays nor keeps respectable company. However, Miryoqub, Akbarali's agent, bribes the Ishan who is Razzoq so‘fi's spiritual guide, and the father gives in, accepting generous gifts [4]. Cho‘lpon thus exposes the hypocrisy of a religious authority that sells a girl's future. Both writers show that the heroine's tragedy begins inside her family: the father, who should be her protector, becomes a mediator between her and her oppressor. In Jaspers' terms, the heroine is thrown into a situation she did not choose and cannot change.

4. The body as a commodity and the predatory male. Alec d'Urberville and Akbarali mingboshi are typologically close figures. Both are rich, both embody a power based on money rather than on moral authority, and both see the heroine as an object of desire. Alec is not even a real d'Urberville: his father simply bought the old name. This detail shows that in Hardy's world the aristocratic past itself has become a commodity. Akbarali is a mingboshi, a local administrator appointed under the colonial system, who already has three wives and takes Zebi as his fourth [4]. The translator Christopher Fort describes the novel as the story of a young girl condemned to marry a sexual glutton [4]; the image of insatiable appetite reflects the reduction of the woman to the body.

The heroines' responses are also comparable. Tess leaves Alec after a few weeks and returns home, refusing to marry him even though marriage would "restore" her reputation. Zebi, unable to leave, resists in the only ways available to her: she pretends to faint and later to suffer from epileptic seizures in order to avoid her husband [4]. Both forms of behaviour are acts of silent resistance. The heroines cannot change their situation, but they refuse to accept it inwardly. Here the existential dimension of the image becomes evident: freedom survives as an inner choice even when external freedom is lost.

5. The boundary situation and the loss of self. The central part of each novel places the heroine in a series of boundary situations. Tess gives birth to a child who soon dies; she baptises the baby herself and names him Sorrow, and when the vicar refuses Christian burial she must bury him in the corner of the churchyard reserved for the unbaptised and the suicides [5]. Later, after a period of happiness at Talbothays dairy, she marries Angel Clare and, on the

wedding night, tells him about her past. Angel, who has just confessed a similar episode in his own life, cannot forgive her and leaves for Brazil. Tess's words "Once victim, always victim — that's the law!" (Ch. 47) [5] express her growing sense that the world is ruled by an impersonal and unjust law.

Zebi's boundary situation is her life in Akbarali's house among rival wives. She is isolated from her mother and from any friendly person, and her feigned illness gradually turns into a real state of fear and estrangement. In both cases the boundary situation produces what Kierkegaard calls anxiety: the heroine experiences guilt before any actual crime, simply because she exists in a world where her very nature is considered sinful. Tess believes she is guilty because of her "past"; Zebi feels guilty before her father, her husband and God, although she has done nothing wrong.

6. Guilt without intention and absurd justice. The climax of both novels is the death of the oppressor. Here the most important difference between the two works appears, but it serves the same tragic idea. Tess, driven back to Alec by her family's poverty after her father's death, kills him with a knife when Angel unexpectedly returns. Her act is conscious, but it is the result of a long series of situations she did not choose. She escapes with Angel, spends a last night at Stonehenge and is arrested there; the novel ends with her execution at Wintoncester.

Zebi's "crime" is entirely unintentional. Akbarali plans to leave his inheritance to Zebi, which threatens the middle wife, Poshshaxon. Poshshaxon puts poison into the teapot. When the drunken Akbarali wakes up at night and asks for water, Zebi in her hurry pours it from the poisoned vessel, and he dies [4]. At the trial Zebi answers honestly and says that she would rather have died herself than harm her husband. Her sincerity, however, has no value for the court. The prosecutor connects her case with political "subversives" and demands the death penalty; her lawyer remains silent; and the girl, who expected to be released, is sentenced to seven years of exile in Siberia [4].

Both endings embody Camus' absurd: the human need for justice meets a legal system that is indifferent to the truth of the individual. Hardy expresses this with bitter irony in the famous last paragraph: "'Justice' was done, and the President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess" (Ch. 59) [5]. The quotation marks around the word *justice* signal that the law has nothing to do with real justice. Cho‘lpon does not use such authorial comment; instead he builds the trial scene so that the reader sees the gap between Zebi's innocence and the court's verdict. The absurdity is intensified by the political context: an innocent village girl becomes a pawn in the colonial administration's struggle against reformers. In both novels, therefore, guilt is not a moral category but a social label imposed on the heroine.

7. Sleep and the moment of fate. A less obvious but important motif connects the two plots: sleep as the moment of the heroine's greatest vulnerability. In Hardy's novel every decisive turn of Tess's fate is linked to sleep. She falls asleep while driving the cart to market, and the horse Prince is killed; she falls asleep in the Chase, and Alec takes advantage of her; and at the end she sleeps on the stone at Stonehenge while the police surround her. Sleep is the

state in which the human being cannot control anything, and Hardy uses it to show that the decisive events of life happen beyond the heroine's will.

In *Kecha va kunduz* the fatal scene is also connected with sleep and darkness. Akbarali falls asleep drunk, wakes up at night and asks for water, and Zebi, half-awake and frightened, hurries to obey and pours the poisoned water [4]. The night, the sleep and the haste turn an ordinary act of obedience into a crime. The motif shows how both writers understand tragic guilt: it is born not from evil intention but from the moment when a person is deprived of clear consciousness and freedom of choice. This brings both novels close to the existential idea that human beings are "thrown" into situations they do not understand.

8. Cosmic and symbolic imagery. The poetics of existential tragedy in the two novels is closely connected with imagery that extends the heroine's fate to the level of the universe. Hardy repeatedly suggests that the world in which Tess lives is not governed by a caring Providence. In an early scene Tess tells her little brother that the stars are like apples on a tree: most are "splendid and sound", but a few are "blighted", and they live on "a blighted one" (Ch. 4) [5]. This image anticipates the whole course of the novel. The landscape of Wessex — the fertile Valley of the Great Dairies, the stony upland of Flintcomb-Ash, the prehistoric stones of Stonehenge — reflects the heroine's inner state and connects her suffering with ancient, impersonal forces. At Stonehenge, a pagan temple, Tess lies on the altar stone as if she were a sacrifice.

Cho‘lpon's central symbol is announced in the title. *Night* and *day* are not only the names of the two planned parts of the dilogy; they are the poles of the moral and historical world of the novel. The "night" is the dark, closed world of the old order, where a girl can be sold and an innocent person condemned; the "day" is the hoped-for future of light and freedom. The novel that has come down to us is only the "Night" part: Cho‘lpon was arrested in 1937 and executed in 1938, and the second part was never published. The tragic structure of the book is therefore doubled by the tragic fate of its author. As O. Sharafiddinov emphasised, Cho‘lpon's work cannot be understood without the historical darkness in which it was created [11]. Zebi's song, the night scenes in Akbarali's house and the final image of her mother wandering the streets form a symbolic system in which darkness dominates and light remains only a hope.

9. Open space and closed space. The organisation of space in the two novels also reflects the heroines' situation. Tess moves constantly. She walks from Marlott to Trantridge, from Trantridge to the Valley of the Great Dairies, from Talbothays to the bare fields of Flintcomb-Ash, and finally to Sandbourne and Stonehenge. Her journeys are often on foot, and the length of the roads emphasises her loneliness. At the same time this movement does not bring freedom: every new place repeats the old pattern, and the harsh labour at Flintcomb-Ash and at the threshing machine shows how the modern economy uses the woman's body as a working force just as Alec used it as an object of desire. Space in Hardy is open, but it is a trap without walls.

Zebi's space, by contrast, is closed. She moves from her father's house to the *ichkari*, the inner women's quarters of Akbarali's house, where she lives among the other wives, and from there to the prison and the court. The traditional division of the Uzbek house into the outer part

for men and the inner part for women becomes in Cho‘lpon's novel an image of confinement. Zebi's world is limited by walls, doors and the veil, and her only way out is her voice. The final journey to Siberia, the most distant place imaginable for a girl from a small Central Asian town, is a terrible parody of freedom: Zebi leaves the closed space only to be sent into exile. In both novels, therefore, space is not a neutral background but an expression of the heroine's lack of freedom — open and endless in Hardy, closed and suffocating in Cho‘lpon.

10. Narrative voice and the reader's sympathy. The two novels also build the reader's relation to the heroine in different ways. Hardy's narrator is visible and emotional. He speaks of Tess with tenderness, defends her against conventional morality and openly argues with the reader. The subtitle "A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented" is itself a statement of the author's position. This narrative voice turns the novel into a kind of trial in which the narrator acts as the heroine's advocate against society.

Cho‘lpon's narrator is more restrained. He rarely comments on Zebi's feelings directly; instead, the reader learns about them through her actions, her silence, her singing and the reactions of other characters. This restraint has both an artistic and a historical explanation. On the one hand, it reflects the tradition of the Uzbek realist novel established by Abdulla Qodiriy, in which the author prefers to show rather than to explain. On the other hand, open authorial protest was dangerous in the political conditions of the 1930s, and Cho‘lpon had to express his position through the composition of the scenes. The trial scene, in which the lawyer remains silent and the prosecutor speaks about politics instead of the facts, is a clear example: the reader himself becomes the true judge, and the injustice of the verdict is evident without commentary. Thus the absence of an advocate in the text makes the reader take this role.

11. The chorus of lament. Both novels give the final word not to the heroine but to those who survive her. Hardy closes *Tess* with the image of Angel Clare and Tess's younger sister Liza-Lu watching the black flag rise over the prison, then bending to the earth "as if in prayer" and going on hand in hand (Ch. 59) [5]. Cho‘lpon ends his novel with Zebi's mother, Qurvonbibi, who has lost her reason: she walks the streets without her veil, in torn clothes, telling people about her daughter's beauty and singing and asking where her daughter is [4]. This figure functions like the chorus of ancient tragedy, but it is a chorus that has lost the ability to explain. The mother's madness is the final expression of the absurd: the world has destroyed meaning, and only grief remains.

Discussion: common and distinctive features

The analysis allows us to formulate the common features of the poetics of existential tragedy in the two novels:

- the heroine's innocence is presented as openness and vulnerability, and her most personal qualities become the cause of her misfortune;
- the tragedy begins inside the family, where the father acts as a mediator between the daughter and her oppressor;
- the oppressor embodies power based on money, and the woman is reduced to a body and a commodity;

– the heroine passes through a series of boundary situations and preserves inner freedom through silent resistance;
– the death of the oppressor leads to a judgement that has nothing to do with real justice, which reveals the absurdity of the social order;
– cosmic and symbolic imagery extends the heroine's personal tragedy to the level of the universe or the historical epoch.

The comparison can be summarised in the following table (Table 1).

Table 1. Elements of the poetics of existential tragedy in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Kecha va kunduz*

Element	Tess of the d'Urbervilles	Kecha va kunduz
Innocence	"blank as snow": beauty and vitality	fifteen years old; the singing voice
Name	Durbeyfield / d'Urberville: the burden of the past	Zebinisa, "the ornament of women"
The father's role	vanity; sends Tess to "claim kin"	accepts gifts after the Ishan is bribed
The oppressor	Alec, owner of a bought name	Akbarali mingboshi, colonial official
Resistance	leaves Alec, refuses marriage	feigned fainting and seizures
Death of the oppressor	conscious act (the knife)	unintentional act (poisoned water)
Punishment	execution at Wintoncester	seven years' exile in Siberia
Space	open roads of Wessex	the closed *ichkari*
Narrative voice	open authorial advocacy	restraint; the reader as judge
Final image	the black flag; Angel and Liza-Lu	the mother's madness and lament

At the same time, the two writers interpret the source of tragedy differently. Hardy's universe is governed by chance and by an indifferent force that he would later call the "Immanent Will" in *The Dynasts*; social injustice is real, but behind it the reader feels an indifferent cosmic order. This gives *Tess* a philosophical, almost metaphysical character. Cho‘lpon's tragedy is more concretely historical and social: its source is the alliance of colonial power, local despotism and religious hypocrisy. Accordingly, Hardy speaks openly through his narrator, commenting, generalising and accusing, while Cho‘lpon prefers to show rather than comment, letting the scenes themselves reveal the injustice. Finally, Tess acts — she kills Alec — whereas Zebi is innocent even of the act. Hardy's heroine therefore reaches a tragic moment of choice, while Cho‘lpon's heroine remains a pure victim; her tragedy lies in the total impossibility of choice.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Kecha va kunduz* shows that the two novels, created in different cultures and without direct contact, share a common typological model of existential tragedy. In both works the female image is the centre in which the main conflict of the epoch is concentrated: the conflict between the individual's awakening self-awareness and a social and cosmic order that denies her freedom and meaning. Kierkegaard's anxiety, Jaspers' boundary situations and Camus' absurd provide a useful conceptual language for describing this model, although neither writer was a philosopher of existence. The differences between Hardy's metaphysical and Cho‘lpon's historical-social understanding of tragedy reflect the different cultural contexts of English and Uzbek prose. Further research may focus on the narrative voice, the function of nature imagery and the reception of both heroines in the critical traditions of their countries.

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