CONCLUSION

After this study and analysis, it is quite evident that agnosticism emerged as an important Weltanschauung in the middle of the nineteenth century in England. It influenced some of the major writers of the day. Since the Biblical myth lost much of its authenticity, the ethos became problematic. The writers found it difficult to examine the situation in the context of any acceptable worldview. The novel of doubt expressing agnosticism became an important medium of cultural communication. Writers like George Eliot, Thomas Hardy and Samuel Butler came under the impact of agnosticism and refused to accept the Christian verities. Their tragic vision is an expression of the spiritual anguish of their time. It lent profoundity and richness to their writings and also set the modern writers on a quest for an identity which continues till this day. George Eliot, Thomas Hardy and Samuel Butler tried to show in their works how an agnostic find it difficult to arrive at any kind of moral or spiritual certainty. All these novelists tried to find out their own individual system whereby to examine the human character.

George Eliot was that common English type, the radical story teller. Her radicalism, at once cautious and courageous lay in the spheres of theology and ethics. “Born in the Established Church, she had become a Calvinistic Methodist as a girl; essentially religious, she was brought by her intellectual honesty to a reluctant agnosticism, an agnosticism that laid as remorseless a stress on morals, on right behaviour, as had the dissent of her youth”. (Allen 220). George Eliot writes in Silas Marner: “Favourable chance is the god of all men who follow their own devices instead of obeying a law they believe in. ... The evil principle deprecated
in that religion, is the orderly sequence by which the seed brings forth a crop after its kind’. George Eliot believe, almost like a fanatic of determination in the orderly sequence by which the seed brings forth a crop after its kind. Human beings were made for good or ill by their actions and in the last analysis of their character, and the consequences of their actions were remorseless.

George Eliot’s moral beliefs chimed with what appeared to be the findings of contemporary science, particularly heredity, which appeared as a scientific—and scientifically proved—determinism. This gave her fiction great authority in its day; later, it was to make it seem dated. Now, when she is again seen as a great novelist, we realize how much of her strength is derived from the very intransigence of her view of human beings. It was a view too mechanistic to allow her to write tragedy. But, by placing the responsibility for a man’s life and fate firmly on the individual and his moral choices, she changed the nature of the English novel. If it is the individual’s choice of action that shapes life, then plot in the old sense of something external to character and often working unknown to it, is irrelevant and unnecessary. George Eliot sees life primarily as a gymnasium for the exercise of the moral faculties.

Thomas Hardy was the quintessential younger, as George Eliot had been the quintessential strict, contemporary of these scientists and philosophers, and therein lies a considerable part of the difference in their attitude to life and to their fictional character. Loss of faith compelled George Eliot to stress, for beyond orthodox Christianity, the individual’s responsibility for his actions. For her, the choice between right and wrong was open for every human being to make; the basis of her ethics is the belief in the freedom of the will. But Hardy was scarcely a moralist at all, because in his universe morals were beside the point: between the forces
of nature, including therein the forces of his own nature, and man’s aspirations there could be no reconciliation; they were eternally opposed, and from the human view the working of nature must appear hostile and malign.

What Hardy found in the science and philosophy of his day reinforced the findings of his temperament and of his observations of a largely traditional way of life. His greatness is due to this marriage between his philosophic pessimism and his habits of saying human behaviour in the moral abiding aspects. Believing that where man was concerned the very nature of things was malign, he believed also that it was more malign the more sensitive, the more intelligent, the more finely organized the human being. The only characters in Hardy who need fear no fall are those already down. Those who live close to earth without aspirations to rise, do not have much to fear.

If George Eliot offers self-renunciation by which to check the egoism inherent in human nature, Samuel Butler stresses the power of the unconscious and of memory perpetuated by breeding and heredity—the power within ourselves, the instinctive wisdom. Faith, i.e. the will to live—unconscious memory and habit constitutes the most essential elements of Butler’s evolutionism or his vitalist philosophy or religion. In The Way of all Flesh, Ernest’s final creed is described as conservative, quietistic and comforting. He urges others and the Church to follow his version of the ‘Christ-Ideal’. At the end of the novel he stands as an unorthodox defender of the Christian faith: ‘The spirit behind the Church is true, though her letter—true once—is now true no longer’. Between the two oppositions of iconoclasm on the one hand and credulity on the other—he opts for a compromise, which is an agnostic’s search for a synthesis.
In *The Way of All Flesh*, we have the opposite phenomenon: Butler’s overall philosophy—that of a late-Victorian sceptical agnostic—is less rigid, more unprincipled, so to speak, than life itself and hence fails to impose a total pattern of the novel. And yet this very failure produces its own kind of rigidity. Butler’s philosophy tends to reduce life and it is reflected in his works. He fearlessly attacks the shams and false values of the Victorian bourgeoisie.

The novels of Samuel Butler have the positive side of liberating crusade against institutional tyranny. They prepared the ground for H.G. Wells (*The New Machiavelli*), Lytton Strachey (*Eminent Victorians*) and most directly for G.B. Shaw. His works replaced conscious hypocrisy by the wisdom of the unconscious, of reason by instinct, of Darwin’s mechanistic doctrine by creative evolution etc. *The Way of All Flesh* was certainly an influence in shaping the twentieth century mind. Samuel Butler’s fiction was one of the intellectual watersheds between the Victorian age and twentieth century; and we respond to its temper of mind, its energy, charity and irony with keen interest.

Though, in the twentieth century, the term agnosticism had lost much of the vogue it enjoyed during the latter half of the nineteenth century, some philosophical movements of the day certainly lean towards agnosticism. Pragmatism and Logical Positivism are agnostic to the extent that their epistemology forbids any knowledge of the absolute. Renowned thinkers like Bertrand Russell and C. E. M. Joad have frankly professed agnosticism as their attitude towards Christian theology and metaphysics. In fact, failure of modern philosophy to provide satisfactory philosophical framework largely accounts for the prevalence of agnosticism in the modern novel. Philosophy has almost ceased to involve system-building and has become linguistic and analytical.
Moreover, the collapse of Christianity, after the First World War, drove the writer towards the agnosticism for this traumatic event led to an atmosphere of spiritual negation and disbelief. David Daiches rightly observes that the spirit of the age was agnostic and Leftwing. In the novels of the nineteen twenties and thirties, agnosticism remains an important principle. Novelists like Aldous Huxley and E. M. Forster conceded that they were agnostic about the human soul.

Knowledge explosion in the recent times has further added to man’s spiritual confusion. Knowledge leads to doubt and destroys value. We have a vision of ultimate Reality until we learn that it is all glandular. We have the mystical experience until the scientist tells us that it is mere change in body chemistry. Religion or Science, Faith or Reason—modern man finds it difficult to make a choice. In no other age, the hiatus between faith and reason has been so wide. Oscillating between faith and reason, the modern writer remains an agnostic.

George Eliot, Thomas Hardy and Samuel Butler were deeply embedded in tradition. Despite their agnosticism, the religious instinct always urged them to seek home positive faith. But the modern writer has no strong attitude to tradition. He has found a substitute for God in the Unconscious, which according to Jung and others psychologists is the source of man’s spirituality. The return of the Unconscious alone can assure integration of personality. This had led to experimentation in fiction. D. H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley and L. H. Myers approach it through sexual experience. Huxley also tries to reach it through Idd. Despite all his frantic search, the modern novelist fails to acquire the mystical experience which, according to the seers of all religions, is the experience of unity of passion and reason.
Thus agnosticism remains a vital principle of the English novel. It is agnosticism which transforms the novel from a mere entertainer to a serious form of art, meant to explore the mystery of existence. The novel came of age in the hands of George Eliot, Thomas Hardy and Samuel Butler. Perhaps, it is for this reason that Davis Cecil hailed George Eliot as the ‘First Modern Novelist’.