INTRODUCTION

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 gave profundity and richness to their writings and also set the modern writers on a quest for identity, which continues till this day. This thesis is an attempt to explore the selected works of these three writers and the influence they handed down to the coming generations.

As a literary genre, the novel in England enjoyed its full measure of popularity during the Victorian era. It became, to use Stendhal’s phrase, ‘a mirror in the roadway,’ and reflected the richness and complexity of the period. In fact, the age saw an explosion of novel writing. What the sonnet was to the Elizabethans, the novel became to the Victorians. It became an important medium of cultural communication and expressed the spirit of the age. No doubt, since its very inception, the English novel has been the vehicle of middle class morality, which derives its sanction from Christianity. The Christian-humanist frame provided the novelist with a philosophical perspective to look at human events. But the Christian world-view lost much of its hold on the Victorian writers, for it was contradicted by the new findings in science. The Victorians suffered a
crisis of conscience. Religious controversies led the spiritual restlessness and moral uncertainty. The novelist was pre-occupied with the spiritual questions of his age. Apart from poetry, it was the novel that expressed the faith and doubt of the Victorians.

While the early Victorian novelists like Charles Dickens and W.M. Thackeray stuck to Wilkie Collins’ formula for the novel—‘make ’em cry, make ’em wait’—the later novelists like George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and Samuel Butler were actually aware of their spiritual predicament, and strove hard to overcome the spiritual crises of the age. As an accompaniment to the new scientific advances of Malthus, Darwin and Huxley doubts about Christianity as such rose to plague the Victorians. The clash between science and scripture resulted in an attitude of agnosticism towards the most fundamental religious questions. Nothing is more or less philosophical to the majority of the novelists of the mid-Victorian era. This is quite evident from Prof. Robert Lee Wolf’s selection of 121 novels of faith and doubt, of this period. Though agnosticism manifests in the novel of many lesser novelists as well, the emphasis in the proposed study would be on the three major novelists, for their novels best embody the spirit of the agnosticism, so characteristic of this age. A survey of the critical writings of the English novel reveals that there exists no substantial critical work that analyses the impact of agnosticism on the major novelists of this period. This explains the purport of the present study.

The term, derived from ‘agnostikos’ (Greek for “not knowing”), is the doctrine which asserts that man does not know and cannot know whether anything exists behind and beyond phenomena; and in particular that we know nothing about a first cause of an unseen world. It accepts the primacy of experience, and does not accept what cannot be rationally
justified. It sets limits to human intelligence by showing the relative nature of human knowledge. It neither denies nor affirms the existence of God, the human soul and its immortality. It merely suspends judgment on such fundamental issues as cannot be scientifically verified. It does not recognise ‘intuition’ as a mode of knowledge. The agnostic position is distinct from both theism, which affirms the existence of such beings; and atheism, which denies their existence.

Though the term ‘agnosticism’ was coined by T.H. Huxley, in the nineteenth century, the attitude had been in vogue before and professed. It emerged in the philosophy of Pyrrho of Elis. Medieval philosophers like Thomas Acquinas debated the importance of reason to know God. Francis Bacon, later on, pointed out the sharp division that existed between the revealed and natural knowledge. David Hume’s empiricist view of knowledge led him to agonistic conclusions. Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* asserted that the thing-in-itself can never be known. Writer like A.B. Keith and R.J. Thomas branded even the Buddha as an agonistic, for the Enlightened One. When asked about God and the Soul and its Immortality, Buddha maintained silence and told his questioner that the most pressing problem of existence was pain, and man should find ways and means to seek liberation from pain.

T.H. Huxley, the British biologist, coined the term Agnosticism to profess his rational and scientific attitude towards religious questions. The existence of God could not be scientifically justified. As Champion of Darwinism, Huxley espoused the cause of Science, and rejected Biblical miracles on the ground that they could not be scientifically verified. Books like Chamber’s *Vestiges of Natural History of Creation*, Darwin’s *Origin of Species* and *Descent of Man*, Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* and *Antiquity of Man*, Huxley’s *Science and Christian Tradition* and *Evolution*
and Ethics contradicted the Genesis. The Darwinian principle of natural selection dealt a fatal blow to the validity of the teleological argument for the existence of God or Supreme Intelligence in the Universe. Faith and reason fell apart, the Victorians suffered from a schism in the soul, or what T.S. Eliot later termed as “the dissociation of sensibility”.

The Victorian stance was essentially rational and scientific. Mystical tendencies were there but these were limited to a few writers. Majority of thinkers suffered from pangs of agnosticism. While the attitude of the people towards the Church and Bible was more or less conventional as to the harsh realities of science. Man’s religious doubt led him towards agnosticism in matters of belief. Therefore, the majority accepted agnosticism as the only valid attitude towards ontological questions. Thus, a wave of agnosticism swept over the entire cultural scene.

Literature cannot be created in a vacuum. The literary artist requires some philosophical framework to scan the human scene. The writer suffered from a sense of isolation and loneliness. Mathew Arnold complained, “We mortal millions live alone”. The poet lamented that he was between the worlds— “The one dead and the other powerless to be born”.

The agnostics of the day found it difficult to accept the smug Victorian morality. Christian ethics is rooted in its theology and salvation. When theology was contradicted by the evolutionary thought, Christian ethics became problematic. The novelist was in a dilemma. He was unable to discover a substitute for religion. He had to struggle hard to discover his values to create a vision of the life. The agnostic writer was desperately in quest of a philosophical nexus. This passionate yearning for values also transformed the nature of the novel. The novel no longer
remained a mere reflection of social milieu and purveyor of morality. It rather became an instrument of exploration into the nature of reality.

The element of agnosticism predominates even in the lesser novels of the day. Novels like Maitland’s *The Pilgrim and the Shrine*, Wimward Reade’s *The Outcast*, James Fuller’s *John Orlebar, the Clerk*, Mrs. Linton’s *Under Which Lord*, Gissing’s *Workers in the Dawn*, Julia Kavnagh’s *The Artful Vicar* embody agnosticism as an important Weltanschauung of the period.

Similarly George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and Samuel Butter professed agnosticism as their attitude towards religious verities. They were firmly rooted in tradition and had strong religious instinct. They struggled hard to overcome their intellectual doubt, and tried to evolve their own moral and philosophical vision. They disapproved of Victorian morality and rejected its sham values. They employed irony as a chief device to express their agnosticism. Their fictional writings express their spiritual restlessness and the desire to seek a substitute for religion.

F.W.H. Myers recorded a conversation with George Eliot at Cambridge in 1873. In that conversation, she concedes that she is an agnostic. Essentially religious, she was brought by her intellectual honesty to what Walter Allen terms as ‘reluctant agnosticism’. Her wide readings in philosophy, and her contact with men like G.H. Lewes, Bray and Herbert Spenser changed her attitude towards Christianity. She read Hennell’s *Enquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity*, and felt sad that “doctrines infinitely important to man are buried in a charred heap of bones, over which nothing is heard but the barks and growls of contention”.
Strauses's *Life of Christ*, and Spencer's *The First Principle* profoundly altered her views on religion, and turned her towards agnosticism. Scientific determinism leads to ethical determinism. She evolves out a moral outlook which is based on the firm conviction that the seed determines the nature of the tree. Though, like Kant, she does not take the existence of God from moral intuition, she nevertheless lays stress on morals. She employs irony to criticise prudential Victorian ethics, and expresses her dissent on its decadent moral values. She regards love as a great value. Her agnostic ethics become a substitute for religion, for she looks at life from this typical moral angel.

Thomas Hardy repeatedly repudiated the charge of atheism levelled against him by critics. He confessed that he was an agnostic. Like George Eliot, Hardy was also deeply affected by the evolutionary controversy, which was at its height during his stay in London. His twilight view of existence is the outcome of his agnosticism. Though not an impeccable rationalist as George Eliot, he nevertheless could not retain belief in the notion of "a transcendental Governing Providence".

The evolution of Hardy's thought reveals that he was consistently under the influence of the leading agnostics of the day. Mrs. Hardy revealed in her accounts how he was influenced by Essays and reviews, which marked the appearance of a very important development of religious and philosophical thought of his day. Then, he had been among the earliest acclamers of *The Origin of Species*. The intellectual atmosphere into which Hardy entered as he entered manhood had two dominating ideas—the Primal cause was immanent in the Universe and not transcendent to it, and that the individual human being was of very small significance in the scheme of things. Herbert Spencer's *The First Principles* and Leslie Stephen's *An Agnostic's Apology*, T.H. Huxley's
Lay Sermons were other significant influences that drove him towards agnosticism. His conceptions about sexual morality, free will and freedom were largely influenced by J.S. Mill’s On Liberty, and Three Essays on Religion.

Hardy’s doctrine of Immanent Will is the result of his agnosticism. To the agnostic, the conception of the Deity as both imminent and transcendent seems paradoxical and incomprehensible. God can be either immanent or transcendent; He cannot be both. So, Hardy employs Immanent Will as a philosophical framework to portray the spiritual predicament of man in an alien and hostile universe. To some extent, he seems to share Albert Camus’ position. There is the same existentialist anguish, the same urge towards philosophical paganism. Hardy also employs irony as a literary device to show malignant nature of the universe.

Samuel Butler was a ‘Truculent Pyrrhonist’, for his pre-occupation with truth led him to reject everything but the exclusive principle of doubt. He derived his agnosticism form ‘Higher Criticism’ of which Strauss had been the pioneer and partly from the contemporary discussion aroused by the Darwinian theory of evolution. In Fair Heaven, Butler argues that there exists no good evidence for the Resurrection having ever occurred. God the known and Unknown examines the possibility of the knowledge of God. He arrives at the agnostic conclusion that it is foolish to expend pen and ink on affirming and denying God’s existence.

Though an impenitent agnostic, Butler all the more shares the agnostic’s anxiety for a positive faith. Darwin, who had made return to the Church of England impossible, offered no solace to the yearner to come out of prevalent crisis. Driven by his need, Butler proceeded to invent a substitute for religion. He protested against the Darwinian
banishment of mind from the universe. He re-asserted the older theory of Creative Evolution professed by Lamarck and Erasmus. This Lamarckism becomes his surrogate for religion. Butler remains by far the bitterest critic of Victorian institutions. Critics like Bergongi have hailed The Way of All Flesh as a time-bomb which undermined the entire edifice of Victorian ethos. He also employs irony to give expression to his agnosticism concerning spiritual entities. In a way, Butler, tried to combine metaphysics and physics, faith and reason, but their unfortunate separation needed stronger glue than his.

Though, in the twentieth century, the term 'Agnosticism' has 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 an their attitude towards Christian theology and metaphysic. 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 World Wars, drove the writer towards 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 twenties and thirties of the twentieth century, agnosticism remains an important principle. Novelists like Aldous Huxley and E.M. Foster conceded that they were agnostic about God and 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 some positive faith. But the modern writer has strong attitude to tradition. He has found a substitute for God in the Unconscious which, according to Jung and other psychologists, is the source of man’s spirituality. The return to the Unconscious alone can assure integration of personality. This has led to experimentation in fiction. D.H. Lawrance, 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 expose the mystery of existence. The novel comes of age in the hands of George Eliot, Thomas Hardy and Samuel Butler. Perhaps it is for this reason that David Cecil hailed George Eliot as the ‘First Modern Novelist’.

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