Conclusion

Reading Hardy’s novels is a perplexing experience. In his novels he has fictionalized the fundamental existential conflicts of man with the inscrutable universe and the social world. The conflicts and tensions that inevitably attend the reality of human existence are the chief focus of his creative work. He is an expositor of man’s sufferings and cosmic alienation. Hardy was quite aware of a crisis, a threat, a fragmentation and alienation that were happening in the nineteenth century. Like Shakespeare Hardy shows an awareness of the cruel irrationality of the conditions of human life. The puerile gods torture us not for punishment, but for sport. Hardy presents a world forsaken by God. H. C. Duffin makes a pertinent observation about Hardy’s Works:

Hardy is among those who have given us works of art wherein, having grasped the central idea of each, we find it to be not only a thing of beauty but a grand moral lesson also.

Hardy believes in the absolute incomprehensibility of the universal forces, and also in the inevitable tragedy of human struggle against them. All of Hardy’s major novels are a record of this deep rooted belief. In novel after novel, he stresses the need to understand this truth and to accommodate to the invincible forces of the universe. Those who rebel are either defeated or killed; and those who surrender continue to achieve at least minimum
success and happiness, but at the cost of their authentic existence. Another chief focus in his novels is the perennial struggle between the individual and society. His highly humanistic imagination calls for a social order that has enough space to accommodate individual differences. Both the rigidity of society and unbridled individualism are brought under severe attack in his novels. Any rational system of morality must synthesise social and individual claims. When either of them is excluded, there is tragedy for the individual as well as for society.

Most of Hardy’s great characters are archetypal. They are engaged into a dual struggle against the forces of the universe and the irrational elements in social traditions. Each of his major characters embodies within himself the totality of human nature. His characters transcend time and place. They are essentially true to life. Judged against the scenario of postmodern approach to life, Hardy assumes greater relevance in his particularly intense respect for cultural and individual specificities. In his novels Hardy critically examines the possibility of happiness in both rural and urban contexts. He loved his Wessex- a metaphor for rural life- for its simplicity and natural forms of living. He is ‘the first writer to achieve the necessary range and realism of the novel of English country life.’ But at the same time, he was not totally averse to the changes that were fast
transforming rural England. Though acutely and painfully conscious of the gradual disappearance of the familiar world, he yet accepted the modern changes as inevitable. In his sociological essay, *The Dorsetshire Labourer* Hardy wrote:

> They are losing their individuality, but they are widening the range of their ideas, and gaining in freedom. It is too much to expect them to remain stagnant and old-fashioned for the pleasure of romantic spectators.  

But Hardy's major objection to the emergent civilization was its emphasis on rationality and the tendency towards universalism. The Enlightenment belief that reason and science alone can achieve human progress and happiness was distrusted by Hardy. He did not believe in Modernism's optimism about achieving a unified destiny for mankind. Hardy's division, especially in his last two novels, shows that no simple solutions are possible to the crisis of mankind. In his refusal to take side with any particular form of life as the ultimate, he remains relevant to the postmodern condition which refuses to accept any fixed formulas about life. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy protests the intransigent Victorian social and moral systems. Though he lived in both the Victorian and the modern world, he was far in advance of his time as Jude and Sue were. Steven Connor's observation of postmodernist culture can be easily applied to the essential spirit of Thomas Hardy as a seer:
First of all, postmodern theory legitimates the evacuation of the centre or the idea of the centre, splintering it into 'dissident micro-territories', 'constellation of voices', and 'plurality of meanings', allowing and promoting specificity and regionalism, social minorities and political projects which are local in shape, or surviving traditions and oppressed forms of knowledge.

Hardy's novels are fundamentally a recognition of the 'voices' of rural England, its virtues and enduring humanity. Modernism failed in the cultivation of the fundamental human virtues of concern and kindness for others. Two World Wars bear witness to this truth. And postmodernism gropes in the ocean of indeterminacy and uncertainty. As mentioned earlier in this dissertation, there are many postmodern thinkers like Lyotard, Derrida and Foucault who hark back to some of the pre-modern values as a solution to the contemporary crisis. What Hardy believed so passionately seems to be valid today. Noorul Hasan makes a very pertinent observation that Hardy saw the rural matrix as 'an alternative to the chaos of rationality and progressive assumptions'.

His greatness consists in bringing to light the wealth of a life of the marginalized, common people. William Howitt (1792-1879) in his book *Rural Life of England* writes about rural England in the following words: 'There is no part of the population for whom so little is done, and of which so little is thought.' But Hardy thought and wrote about them more effectively than any English novelist. In rustic life Hardy found, as did Wordsworth, the real emotions and
feelings of humanity. Hardy’s works have some influence upon and
affinities with writers such as John Cowper Powys, John Fowles, William
Faulkner, Ibsen, Zola and Dreiser. All these writers base the details of their
narratives on ordinary life. Their works present the helpless subordination
of the individual to external forces. Like Hardy, they too are sympathetic to
the individual whose identity and individuality are recognized. Hardy does
not seem to believe that ‘self identity is constituted within the gaze of the
other.’ For him the individual weighs more than society. But in their
passionate quest for authentic existence, Hardy’s heroes and heroines are
ruined by society. They protest against unbearable human conditions; they
challenge the basis of prescribed social morality without any success. They
succumb to public opinion and the ‘human compact.’ So in Hardy’s novels
there is a consistent confrontation between the individual conscience and
social conscience. The illustration of this division is one of the themes of
Wessex novels.

Hardy’s disapproval of any attempt to shape the world in the image
of the privileged is evident in all his novels, especially in Jude the Obscure
and Tess of the d’Urbervilles. The Victorian attempt to interpret reality in
a centralist mode is called in question. Victorian England was not quite
different from its colonizers outside the country, where they suppressed the
other for their difference. But in the twentieth century we find an inversion of many of the western paradigms of thought. And by the time we come to the postmodern world, the distinction of centre and periphery becomes more and more blurred. The nineteenth and twentieth century conceptions of social and moral theories are deconstructed in the postmodern critique of western epistemology. Many of the Victorian social and moral perspectives which Hardy questioned are today deconstructed or dismantled as absurd. Hady’s novels are indictments of Victorian ethical hegemony and modern trust in rationality and its ability to arrive at the truth. He tried in his own way to critique the dominant categories of ethical and social systems of his time. It would not be wrong to describe Hardy as a ‘Victorian postmodernist.’ According to Terry Eagleton, we are simultaneously and inextricably modernists and traditionalists-always in and out of time simultaneously.® The Victorian society had witnessed a deep cultural crisis-a transition from the traditional to the modern which offered no real solutions to the basic problems of life. This anxiety is evident in Hardy’s novels more than in any other novelists of his time. To quote Frederick R. Karl:

Although Hardy’s roots, like George Eliot’s were solidly within a nineteenth century intellectual framework- a pre-Freudian world of Darwin, Spencer, and Huxley- nevertheless, his characters and plots move in a sphere unknown to his contemporaries, an area that no other
Victorian, excepting Dickens in some of his minor characters, had attempted to define

Hardy’s understanding and observation of life, his knowledge of human character, his insight into motive and passion, his wisdom and his quality as a seer- all these combine to give to his view of the world a moral significance which no thoughtful reader is likely to overlook. When we speak of morality in Hardy, we do not mean that Hardy wrote his novels to prove any thesis or to convey any moral lesson. But, his impressions about life and morality seem to be the fundamental problems of mankind. And all his novels can be read as pointers to this problem. In this connection Wolfgang Iser’s observation is worth quoting:

The unwritten aspects of apparently trivial scenes, and the unspoken dialogue within the ‘turns and twists’, not only draw the reader into the action, but also lead him to shade in the many outlines suggested by the given situation, so that these take on a reality of their own. Like his autobiography, they seem to conceal more than they tell. Hardy pleads, like the postmodernists, to employ more than one hermeneutic approach to decipher the meaning and purpose of life. Meanings are not single, but multiple. Besides, they are devoid of any ‘metaphysics of presence.’ They are historical and social constructs. Any approach to life that does not respect pluralism in all walks of life is against the very nature of man. Hardy objected to the arbitrary construction of historical and
cultural realities. He admired rural culture and resented unreasonable importation of rationality into it. As mentioned earlier, man is engaged into a battle against the universal order and society. And in these conflicts, it is the latter which destroys the individual. Hardy is opposed to the suppression of the natural in man. In his novels all the major characters are destroyed by the mechanical and legalistic aspects of society. They are defeated or ruined by the false social world. All the major characters of Hardy are defeated or killed for their authentic selfhood, for their difference. This is true of Eustacia Vye, Michael Henchard, Tess, Jude and Sue. With relentless courage Hardy has tried to communicate that life cannot be reduced to a system of mere rationalistic ideas. An individual’s existence is unique and distinct. He is responsible for his actions and life. He exists authentically in so far as he strives to realize values that are really his own. Beyond a certain point Hardy’s authentic characters refuse to be shaped by the artificial social and moral laws. They transcend all categorization. In its essence Hardy’s novels capture the existential truth that the very fact of communal existence points to a confrontation with that which is other than itself. Lance St. John Butler’s observation about Hardy’s work is worth looking at:
Hardy's world view probably coincides far more closely with what we are now likely to see as the truth than the world view of most of the said great.

Hardy is fundamentally a celebrant of the uniqueness of individual life. He castigates the individual only when there is a rebellion against the values embodied in a cultural community. He has always seen a traditional, cultural community as a true representative of the natural world. It is the artificially constructed social world which is opposed to the cultural self of his characters. According to him the social world is an irrational historical construct. It tries to alienate man from his natural self. Therefore, it should go.

In Hardy there is no division when it comes to a confrontation between the authentic individual and the inauthentic social world. He dismisses society's intransigent attitude as irrational. His novels are a record of this perennial conflict and dilemma encountered by humanity. But Hardy's ultimate approach to these existential problems is informed by a deep insight into and understanding of the nature of human existence. Individual authenticity and moral conscience are recognized by him in so far as they conform to what he believes to be the laws of nature. He does not let the individual undermine certain moral laws if that leads to chaos in society. Similarly, society is castigated for its intransigent attitude towards genuine, authentic individuals. When individual selfhood is in danger of
being submerged in some impersonal kind of collectivism, he champions the legitimate right of the individual. Hardy lets the individual stand out as the unique person he is. He does not believe in any supreme power that establishes values or sets an ideal towards which all must strive. The only ideal he values is the ideal of the incomprehensible, primal morality of nature. The struggle to free oneself from the tyranny of society is one of the obvious themes of Hardy's novels. Unless the individual frees himself from the crowd, he cannot be fully himself.

Hardy believes that the individual and society are indissolubly bound together. His novels are an eloquent reminder of this truth. They reveal the inevitable interpenetration of the individual and his social world. They are rooted in the common experience of humanity. Hardy is simultaneously a celebrant of age old forms of traditional living and a discerning critic of the irrational elements of social conventions that restrict human freedom or diminish human dignity. His much acclaimed cultural imagination has been able to accommodate individual specificity and authenticity of existence. Hardy's postmodern tendency lies basically in his particular concern for the uniqueness of the individual subject and an acknowledgment of the plurality of human nature. In the contemporary world the conditions of life are changing so fast. Consequently, there is a continuous search to find solutions to the problems of living. Hardy's
suggestion to look inward rather than outward seems to have relevance in our time of cultural crisis.

The apparent contradictions and inconsistencies in his novels suggest not a lack of intellectual integrity or emotional balance; rather it is the sincerity of a mind in search of a meaningful and happy life. That he has refused to subscribe to any particular system is the mark of his greatness as a true artist. The essence of Hardy’s impressions about life is summed up in his own words:

After reading various philosophic systems, and being struck with their contradictions and futilities, I have come to this: Let every man make a philosophy for himself out of his own experiences. He will not be able to escape using terms and phraseology from earlier philosophers, but let him avoid adopting their theories if he values his own mental life. Let him remember the fate of Coleridge, and save years of labour by working out his own views as given by his surroundings.  

It is a view which resists all forms of universalism. Hardy’s view of life is tentative and transitory. His art selected and gave imaginative shape to various and sometimes conflicting experiences. Hence, his ambivalence. Taken together his major novels from *Far from the Madding Crowd* to *Jude the obscure* constitute a prophetic and intuitive understanding of what is recognized today as the inescapable reality of living. At birth, Hardy was thrown aside as dead till he was rescued by the woman who attended as nurse. Finding him alive, she exclaimed to the surgeon, ‘Dead! Stop a
minute: he’s alive enough, sure! Indeed, Hardy is more alive and relevant in today’s world than he was in his own.
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