Chapter 4

The Woodlanders (1887)

The Woodlanders, like Far from the Madding Crowd is chiefly a celebration of the traditional, rural forms of living. At the same time it contains Hardy’s sense of cultural crisis—a theme that dominates postmodern discourses. It is a study of the conflict between the rural and the urban, between culture and nature. Though set in an Arcadian, pastoral ambience, the novel explores the crisis experienced by a traditional community in a transitional state. In this connection Ian Gregor observes:

Recollections, the remembrance of things past, a concern to render a consciousness increasingly susceptible to the tensions of the present, and these elements give the peculiar colour to The Woodlanders ¹

It is the tragedy of fragmented consciousness; it is the tragedy of combining “modern nerves with primitive feelings.....”(p.306) Grace Melbury, initiated into modern ³ education by her father is shown to be “doomed by such co-existence to be numbered among the distressed and to take her scourgings to their exquisite extremity.”(p.306) The personal history of Grace vividly illustrates the catastrophic consequences of adopting a way of life that in itself lacks any stable centre. William Butler Yeats sums up the malaise of the modern age:

Page references to The Woodlanders are to the Macmillan edition (1967)
Tilings fall apart; the centre cannot hold; 
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

Grace Melbury abandons her native culture, like Clym, to embrace a culture which is only socially attractive, but lacks any enduring human values. In Winterborne’s self reflection Hardy makes Grace’s plights evidently clear in the novel:

He questioned if her father’s ambition, which had purchased for her the means of intellectual light and culture far beyond those of any other native of the village, would not operate to the flight of her future interests above and away from the local life which was once to her the movement of the world. (p.67)

Neither George Melbury nor Grace realises that ‘all giverns, or what Lyotard calls the “metanarratives” offer no final answers or resolutions.’

Melbury’s error is the rejection of his native culture for the emerging new one that he falsely believes to be superior and more universal. He is a victim of the totalizing attitude of modernism. But towards the end of the novel there is a kind of moral growth in Melbury. He becomes apprehensive about the real worth of modern education and its positive impact on actual living. Grace’s reunion with Fitzpiers, her return to modern ways, is viewed by Melbury with apprehension: “It’s a forlorn hope for her; and God knows how it will end!” (p.376) Melbury is deceived by the modern ideal of self realization of mankind through the instrumentality of reason. He is a victim of the transformational myth of culture. It is a notion
repudiated by the postmodern critique of modernism. Apart from Melbury, Dr. Fitzpiers and Mrs. Charmond are also victims of this false notion. Though Hardy never wrote against any theoretical framework, his novels contain much of the postmodern debate on the question of truth and universality. The profound ontological uncertainty of the postmodern is shared by Hardy in *The Woodlanders*. There is a crisis of culture, a crisis of centre. When Grace is asked to leave the ‘centre’ of Little Hintock for the modern, urban ‘centre’, Mr. Melbury blindly believes in the superiority of the latter. This is totally negated by postmodernism. All centres have their intrinsic worth. And it is in this belief that Hardy relates to postmodern thought.

Grace Melbury’s plight is the result of the capriciousness of her father: “To sow in her heart cravings for social position was obviously his strong desire..... (p.93.) But being brought up in the Sylvan surroundings in Little Hintock, she has imbibed its fundamental values and cultural sensibilities. The newly accomplished refinements are only external to her essential nature. She remains false to her authentic self when she rejects Giles Winterborne as her life partner. When she suppresses her native cultural consciousness, she is inviting her own damnation in her psychic world. She remains divided between her social self and the private self. If
Tess is ruined by her traditional consciousness, Grace is ruined by the traditional and the modern consciousness. About the character of Grace Ian Gregor makes a keen observation:

If then I make a claim that the creation of Grace is of striking significance in Hardy’s development as a novelist, it is not based on her intrinsic worth, but rather on the fact that she is a creation who has released in him a new complexity of insight into aspects of the contemporary consciousness.3

To some extent Grace is a fore-runner of Sue Bridehead. In her we can trace the beginning of modern consciousness which will find its culmination in Sue. Grace’s rural consciousness is invaded by modern education and urban values. She is a victim of man made social hierarchies. Dale Kramer’s observation in this regard is worth quoting:

_The Woodlanders_ expresses some of the most important elements of Hardy’s analysis of the role of social pressures on man’s chances for happiness.4

When natural human sentiments and affinities are rejected in the name of education and learning, one is falling victim to a world of binary opposition which has no real value in reality. The new world assumes a centralist role and the old is marginalized or pushed to the periphery. Hardy seems to doubt the efficacy of education to bring about lasting happiness to the individual. He is not against education or its humanizing role. What he resents is the rejection of natural life in the name of modern accomplishments. Mr. Melbury, in his inordinate passion for the social
status of his daughter, fails to recognise the truth that one cannot escape one’s essential self. Besides, what is important in life is happiness, not mere social glory without happiness. Both Fitzpiers and Mrs. Charmond have enough social distinction, but not happiness. They are hungry for the basic human needs-love and happiness. It is here their mode of living is contrasted with the simple life of Little Hintock. They fail to practise the most important Hardyian virtue—the virtue of communal living. If Grace remains morally and socially virtuous throughout her life, it is not due to her accomplished learning, but due to her cultural values.

In Grace’s tragic love-affair with Fitzpiers, Hardy sees the tragedy of human relationship in a world that does not respect the individuality of the other. The emerging new culture is devoid of morality though it may be intellectually illuminating. It is more self-centered than altruistic. The likes of Giles and Marty South are alien to it. It betrays an inherent moral hollowness where human relationships are concerned. Grace Melbury accepts Fitzpiers instead of Giles partly because of her father’s insistence and partly because of her illusory notion of her social superiority over Giles. Her natural affinity is with Giles. This is best understood by a rustic woman like Grammer Oliver:
But though she's a lady in herself, and worthy of any such as he, it do seem to me that he ought to marry somebody more of the sort of Mrs.Charmond, and that Miss Grace should make the best of Winterborne.(p.151)

There is no compatibility between Grace and Fitzpiers. Theirs is not a relationship born out of any natural affinity like that of Jude and Sue. They forge a relationship based on cultivated social affinity which cannot last without the fundamental spiritual affinity. Their incompatibility is hinted at by Hardy early in the novel:

As he receded and was clasped out of sight by the filmy shades he impressed Grace as a man who hardly appertained to her existence at all. Cleverer, greater than herself, one outside her mental orbit, as she considered him, he seemed to be her ruler rather than her equal, protector, and dear familiar friend. (p.172)

It is the “poor unpractical lofty-minded dreamer”, Mr. Melbury who drags Grace into her tragic situation. The events after Grace’s marriage with Fitzpiers prove that it is neither education nor social status that brings happiness, but the ability to accept one’s own self. In The Woodlanders, Hardy places side by side the ethos of two ways of living- the traditional and the modern. Mr. Melbury’s passion for modern education is suggestive of the change of attitude in people brought about by the new civilization. In spite of its apparent deficiency in the more enduring values of humanism as embodied in Giles and Marty, it makes its presence felt even in a traditional community like Little Hintock. It is ‘vulnerable to forces
beyond its control.' It is invaded by new thoughts and ideas. Hardy is acutely conscious of a life that is dying fast. Modernism has already made its inroads into the rural community. Mr. Melbury's error is that he perceives only one aspect of it—its guarantee for ever greater social mobility and fails to comprehend its ugly side. He fails to see that 'the process has altered the entire social structure.' Along with learning there occur changes not only in the individual, but also in the social structure—some positive and some negative. The French thinker Rousseau argued that 'civilization and learning corrupt human nature.' This is exactly what we encounter in the characters of Fitzpiers and Mrs. Charmond. Rousseau celebrated the 'original', 'natural', uncivilized man, the 'noble savage' who was free of the powerful institutions of the state.

In *The Woodlanders* as in *Tess* and *Jude*, 'Hardy examines a countryside seriously ravaged by dispossession, migration and consequent alienation.' The traditional Hintock life begins to be disturbed in its very roots. Fitzpiers and Felice Charmond are the agents of this process. The theme of modernist alienation is so powerfully present in *The Woodlanders*. Giles's love-suit is defeated in the face of a false ethic of social superiority. He is alienated from Grace by the artificially constructed social distinctions which have no real value in actual living. Like Michael
Henchard, Giles Winterborne is a misfit in the new world. But unlike Henchard, he retreats to his cloistered world of Little Hintock without a murmur of protest or any attempt to fight back. Though there is resolute endurance in his character, there is no sign of struggle. He accepts his condition stoically. The irony is that he allows himself to be annihilated by both the traditional and the modern forces. For instance, his death is caused by his adherence to the traditional Hintock morality. He offers his little hut to Grace and sleeps outside in the rain for days to honour the moral propriety of his community:

He had immolated himself for her comfort, cared more for her self respect than she had thought of caring. (p.328)

Giles sacrifices himself not simply for the sake of Grace, but also for a worn out, traditional moral system. Here Hardy is trying to make a distinction between morality and moral dogmatism. The only fault that he finds with traditional society is its uncritical conformity to a moral code that doesn’t take into account the context of a situation while passing moral judgments. In this connection Dale Kramer makes a pertinent observation:

Rather than dying for a besieged and doomed traditional system of ethics, in which emotional relationships are based on affinities and on an acceptance of sexual instincts and drives, Giles is forced into the position of sacrificing himself for a precept in a temporal value system.9

And temporal value system is called in question by the postmodern critique of western epistemology for its tendency to universalize. And on
the other hand, Giles loses Grace because she is trained in modern refinements whereas he is not. In the ultimate analysis, *The Woodlanders* may be seen as a conflict between natural love and the restraints imposed upon it by a social code which denies the possibility of giving expression to one's natural self. The Woodlanders are invaded by a new form of life which is alien to their cultural ethos. But still they remain rooted in the conventional mode of thinking and living although they are exposed to the outside world. The heroine, if Grace can be called 'a heroine at all, simply stands for a modern sensibility that will find its full flowering in Sue.

Grace Melbury represents the dilemma of the modern fragmented consciousness. She is torn between two dialectically opposed worlds. The experience of cultural schizophrenia is more acutely felt by Grace than any other characters in the novel. It is 'the character of Grace Melbury that is most involved in the conflicts between pastoral and anti pastoral, traditionalism and modernism.' When Hardy presents the two dialectically opposing worlds, he is trying to reveal, in contrasting light, the traits of both the worlds. However the finality of Hardy's vision in this novel favours the traditional over the modern. In this he is not succumbing to any kind of universalism. Rather he refuses to recognize the cultural superiority of modernism. His intuitive understanding of life does not give
any centralist status to that which is neither proved nor tested. He questions the validity of modernism in its epistemological claim. When transcendental knowledge is negated and the “metaphysics of presence” is a mere illusion, what ultimately matters is acceptance of the given socio-cultural context. Grace’s tragedy, to some extent, lies in her inability to detach herself from her inherited heritage or to accept the new one unconditionally. In this connection Dale Kramer’s observation is worth quoting:

Grace not only contains within herself the Hardyan division between sophistication and rustic simplicity but her struggles to reconcile that division also give the various subplots their essential relevance.11

With *The Woodlanders*, Hardy ventures into a different kind of fiction, a fiction that engages into unsettled, uncertain cultural issues. He critically examines the possibilities of a different kind of living. To quote Ian Gregor:

There is the community of Little Hintock sustained by memory and its routine of work, but it is a community which can no longer cohere; in the sense that it is vulnerable to forces beyond its control, it is devoured by its isolation.12

Hardy gradually begins to recognize the existence of a world beyond his cultural imagination. But the question is whether he approves of the values
of such a world. At the end of the novel, Grace moves into that world with Fitzpiers, though unwillingly. In her plight Hardy seems to see the inevitability of change, no matter how one takes it. On the other hand, Marty South's promise to the soul of Giles that she would cherish his memory is suggestive of her commitment to the native values of Little Hintock. So the novel places side by side two opposing modes of living. Both have their own peculiar advantages and disadvantages. But Hardy clearly reveals the moral hollowness of the new civilization which is only materially beneficial, but spiritually empty. *The Woodlanders* is, perhaps, Hardy's only novel that shows the crisis of culture in the most intense fashion. He seems to have accepted, though painfully, the inevitability of change:

Grace and Fitzpiers have to go forward to a world elsewhere, a world beyond the woodlands and the orchards, along the deserted highway and out into life—the author's life and our own.13

Though it is true that there is no 'strongly defined inner life' in Grace, she is an apt embodiment of the conflict between cultures and its impact on the individual.14 She assumes significance not in any intense articulation of her inner life, but in the dilemma encountered in her social existence. It is the duality of consciousness in her that becomes the focus
of the novel. Noorul Hasan observes that the ‘old cultural symbols are still active beneath her conscious estrangement from them.’ There is an intense discord in her between tradition and modernity. She ultimately becomes an ‘embodiment of conflicting modes of existence.’ So the postmodern crisis of culture finds eloquent expression in Grace’s existential plight. What ultimately triumphs in Grace is not the cultivated self, but the natural one. If she is reunited with Fitzpiers in the end, it is due to her traditional respect for a marriage contract. Throughout the novel Grace makes reference to her natural affinity with Hintock and its people. To Fitzpiers’s scornful assertion of his difference from the Hintock folk, Grace replies: “And from me, too, then. For my blood is no better than theirs.” (p.185) It is this blood that dominates in her. And ironically, it is the same blood that kills Giles. While keeping Giles away from the hut for propriety’s sake, Grace is succumbing to the conventional morality of her community. She sacrifices natural love for unnatural moral laws. In Giles’s reverence for propriety and Grace’s acceptance of it, there is an authorial irony at the traditional morality. To quote Ian Gregor:

There is in The Woodlanders the sterility of self abnegation— an abnegation which can never be confined to the self but is common to the whole way of life. This finds its clearest expression in the characters of Marty and Giles.
What is the real basis of sex? Love or contract? After the estrangement of Grace from Fitzpiers she still honours the contract, while her heart is with Giles:

Not that I feel morally bound to any one else after what has taken place—no woman of spirit could—now, too, that several months have passed. But I wish to keep the proprieties as well as I can. (p.290)

The absurdity of such proprieties is vividly stated when Giles dies outside his own hut for a morality that has no foundation outside the boundaries of this rigid social world. It is moral convention, not moral decorum that Hardy is anxious to put to critical scrutiny. Grace lives most intensely for Giles at a distance. She suppresses her natural inclinations for a moral system that does not care for the authenticity of feeling. But as the novel progresses there is a personal and moral growth in her. She gradually realizes the mistake of her marriage with Fitzpiers.

George Melbury is the only character from the traditional Little Hintock to become deeply aware of the presence of a different world around him. 'He has learnt the nature of social change, the importance of adaptation, and that what was good enough for him is no longer good enough for his daughter.'¹⁸ The central crisis of The Woodlanders originates from Melbury's ambition for social status. Like Hardy's short story, 'The Son's Veto' this novel is a story of the cruelty of social
ambition. Randolf in the short story is spoiled by his notions of gentility. Similarly, Mr. Melbury looks upon everything from the point of view of social decorum. Hardy sees the advancing civilization of the city as trivial and dehumanizing. It is evident in the characters of Mrs. Charmond and Dr. Fitzpiers. Mr. Melbury sends his daughter to school out of a desire to give her social advantages which he has been denied. He falls prey to a false system of values. In the name of learning and education he can humiliate, even annihilate his own identity in front of her educated daughter:

If you should ever meet me then, Grace, you can drive past me, looking the other way. I shouldn’t expect you to speak to me, or wish such a thing- unless it happened to be in some lonely private place where ’twouldn’t lower ’ee at all. (p.166)

Such a self degrading attitude is a blind acceptance of a culture that he is yet to be acquainted with more intimately. In his ambitions for his daughter, he betrays the values of his own native culture. He blindly accepts the centrality of culture over nature. He acknowledges the validity of binary opposition. It is a notion that postmodern thought repudiates. And it is exactly what Hardy rejected as absurd. Mr. Melbury’s utilitarian attitude is a negation of the identity of Grace as an individual. He uses her as a means to gain greater returns. The conversation between them as they
go through the cheque book and counterfoils reveals Melbury's utilitarian mentality:

'I, too, cost a good deal, like the horses and wagons and corn!' she said, looking up sorrowly. 'I don't want you to look at those; I merely meant to give you an idea of my investment transactions. But if you do cost as much as they, never mind. You'll yield a better return.' (p. 94)

He accepts the modern culture as central and his own as the marginal. Such totalizing attitude is not acceptable to Hardy as it is with the postmodern critique of hierarchies. Melbury's attitude reveals 'the tendency of the self to exaggerate the other's difference, an exaggeration which arises out of self's anxiety and uncertainty regarding its own identity.'

The new civilization with its social glitter and economic advantages has shaken the foundations of an established form of living. Melbury is too quick to decide upon the superiority of the new culture, and pays for it dearly. To quote Noorul Hasan: '....the action of the novel is designed to confront him with the consequences of his overreaching ambition and snobbishness and finally to reconcile him to the community.'

Melbury goes through a lot of tension, more than any other character in the novel. It is not before an agonizing conflict that he breaks his promise with Giles. There is a deep tension in him between his past promise to Giles and his new decision to marry Grace to Fitzpiers. And
when he settles for Fitzpiers, he is guilty of moral breach on two grounds: first of all, his decision does not bring the desired happiness to Grace; and secondly, he has broken a promise to his fellow being. Grace’s disillusionment with her new social condition is best expressed in her reproach to her father:

I don’t see that I ought. I wish I had never got into it. I wish you had never, never thought of educating me. I wish I worked in the woods like Marty South! I hate genteel life, and I want to be no better than she! (p.229)

As far as Grace is concerned, her social cultivation has brought her only troubles. She regrets her father’s whimsical fancies about social standings: “Yes I have never got any happiness outside Hintock that I know of, and I have suffered many a headache at being sent away.” (p.230) She attains authentic existence in this moment of her self-knowledge. Melbury is guilty of turning his daughter into a mere instrument for fulfilling his own unrealized dreams. He does not respect the individuality of the other. Grace’s subjectivity is never respected by Melbury. He is a mere manipulator of her thoughts and feelings. He wants to submerge her essential self into the self of the larger world that does not offer any enduring human values as represented by Giles and Marty South. And eventually her natural world is irrevocably lost to her. Learning and education are not undermined by Hardy. But ‘it is only when education is
flaunted as a kind of wealth, a material possession leading to social enhancement that it becomes suspect.¹²¹

Mr. George Melbury represents a traditional society’s ‘suicidal pandering to false values.’²² He does not seem to be aware of what is lost to Grace as an individual in his overreaching ambition for social distinction. Through Melbury’s ultimate disillusionment with his dream world, Hardy shows the undecidability, the uncertainty of any system constructed by man as a universal pattern. Michael Riffaterre observes:

One of the most striking developments in recent literary criticism, especially deconstructive criticism, has been the growing popularity of the concept of undecidability.²³

Melbury fails to realize that everything is meaningful and right in its own context. His tragedy is a denial of this significant postmodern concept. He is obsessed with a singularity of perception. He is unable to recognize the plurality of social living. By attributing a greater significance to nurture he marginalizes one of the binary opposites, that is, nature. But the novel does not offer any evidence to show that ‘nature’ is inferior to ‘culture’ especially in the cultivation of humanistic values as embodied in Giles and
Marly South. The historic constructions of what is good or bad, superior or inferior, are mere illusion without any basis in reality. The character of Melbury is in its essence a critique of modern tendency to replace what is stable with what is culturally questionable. Both Grace and Melbury are totally confused individuals. Eugene Goodheart observes that ‘the characters of Hardy’s novels are somewhat confused products of social creation and natural endowments.’

The image of modern man is best expressed by T. S. Eliot: “Men are bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind.” The modern education has brought a crisis, a threat, a fragmentation and alienation that are new to Grace’s cultural consciousness.

Giles Winterborne and Marty South remain unperturbed by the larger social changes taking place around them. But both are victims of social changes without being active participants in it. They are firmly rooted in their culture. Giles accepts his existential situation without a murmur of complaint. He is meant to convey not only Arcadian simplicity, but a morality that is both altruistic and humanistic in nature. His father was once wronged by Mr. Melbury and now he himself is wronged by him for his social ambition. But Giles remains unperturbed in the face of all adversities. Even Fitzpiers, a sophisticated modern representative, envies Giles’s “chivalrous character.”

His character is not informed by any
learning or education. It is nature unadorned. In his stoicism he is a companion to Gabriel Oak. His self sacrifice is evocative of that of Sydney Carton in Charles Dickens’s novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*. After the tragic death of Giles, Grace comes to praise his character more than ever:

Nothing ever had brought home to her with such force as this death how little acquirements and culture weigh beside sterling personal character.

(p.344)

Of all the characters in *The Woodlanders*, Giles shares Hardy’s cultural sensibility more than anybody else. Referring to the character of Giles, Noorul Hasan makes a pertinent observation about Hardy’s cultural imagination:

The archetypal Hardy hero is not the natural man, not the noble savage, but the communal man, the man capable of fellow-feeling and cultural inheritance.\(^25\)

Set against the ambitious Melbury and his educated daughter, Giles lacks the traits of both but he has a personality that is free from any division. He is sure of himself whereas both Melbury and Grace drift between two cultures, settling with neither. He is implacably rooted in his time and place. There is no sign of cultural crisis in him.
Giles differentiates himself from the rest of the characters in the novel, except Marty South, in his intuitive awareness of the historical as well as cultural significance of his existence. He does not rebel. He does not pine for imaginary 'absences.' Though his end is tragic and his life has been one of frustrated youthful dream, he never loses his moral integrity till the end. He knows and practises what the learned fail to do.

Giles is a victim of the pressures of society; he is a victim of conventional morality. Nowhere is it more concretely revealed than in his self abnegating death. It is difficult to understand the natural Giles Winterborne whose 'fastidious morality seems so unnatural, or the cultivated Felix Charmond, who can't resist the promptings of her instinct.' Hardy does not simply present Winterborne as a passionless human being. He is blood and flesh. At least on one occasion his humanity outlives the conventional barriers. He lives like a man when he takes Grace in his arms and kisses her for the first and last time. And Hardy comments:

Winterborne, though fighting valiantly against himself all this while—though he would have protected Grace's good repute as the apple of his eye, was a man; and, as Desdemona said, men are not gods. (p.299)

But the guilt that grips him after that reveals his primitiveness and the force of social convention over his personality that "he would hardly
refrain from tears.”(p.300) It is the same propriety which makes Grace say: “Can it be that cruel propriety is killing the dearest heart that ever woman clasped to her own!”(p.322) Giles’s self sacrifice is in contrast with the utilitarian ethos of the emergent new world of Mrs.Charmond and Dr.Fitzpiers.

Marty South is a fit moral companion to Winterborne. ‘She incarnates the strength of Hardy’s peasant stock, and feel deeply but quietly, accepting stoically whatever fate gives them.’ She is Giles’s true partner in knowing nature. Like Giles she personifies the quality of conventional moral values. She embodies an ideal of silent affection, self abnegation and stoic acceptance of one’s existential situation. Her unambitious existence may be contrasted with the ambitious project of Melbury. But it is ironic that both the states of life are visited by sufferings. It is the mysterious way of the universe, Hardy seems to suggest. Thinking of Marty we are reminded of the subaltern in the colonial culture. But she is a self exiled subaltern. She is not exploited except in the sale of her hair for Mrs.Charmond. But that too is done after learning that Giles is not for her but for Grace:‘That, then, is the secret of it all’, she said. ‘I had half thought so. And Giles Winterborne is not for me!’(p.23) Marty’s is a limited, unambitious world. The thought of the loss of Giles is unbearable
to her. Yet, Like Gabriel Oak, she bears her pains without malice or grudge. Gabriel Oak remains faithful to Bathsheba in spite of her callousness towards him. He always keeps the interest of his loved one above his own. Similarly, Marty always wishes Winterborne happiness. Never once does she open her heart to him or try to seduce him into a marriage with her as Arabella does with Jude. Her character and gentleness are evocative of Lucie Manette in *A Tale of Two Cities*. If we look at Marty's sale of her hair to Mrs. Charmond from a symbolic point of view, it re-establishes the interdependence of human life. It is ironic that Mrs. Charmond can sustain her charming appearance only with the help of a person who belongs to a community that she despises. A similar situation arises when Dr. Fitzpiers does not hesitate to use Melburyy's money though he despises his class. What does Hardy try to suggest here? Both the representatives of modernism depend on what they despise for their survival. It shows an unconscious recognition of the relevance of the other. No system or individual gains significance in isolated existence. Hardy stresses the interdependence of human existence. Irving Howe observes that the characters of Marty and Giles come as a 'relief from the endless clatter about individuality which fills modern literature and life.'

162
Dr. Edred Fitzpiers is a social snob. He seems to be firmly rooted in the modern culture of hierarchies. His tragic failure is the intolerance of the identity of the 'Other'. If we examine closely we find that *The Woodlanders* is a celebration of difference, not a repudiation or rejection of it. In its essence the novel establishes the fundamental postmodern respect for cultural pluralism. Postmodernism is a correcting or readjusting of old perceptions and world view; it presents a radical change of attitude to global co-existence. Multiplicity, transience and specificity are the distinguishing characteristics of the postmodern condition. There is an erosion of fixities and monopoly of perception. Respecting the specificity and difference of the various social and cultural groups is the underlying structure of postmodern thought. We live in a world of interconnected differences. No absolutes or universals are taken for granted. It is a totally decentred world. There is a radical decomposition of all central principles of culture, philosophy, politics and even literature. But Fitzpiers's whole life and attitude are marked by a rejection of the other; it amounts to 'the annihilation of the other.' He is oppressed by the rusticity of the people of Little Hintock. His snobbishness is informed not only by his false notions of social superiority but also by a deep rooted hypocrisy and inauthenticity. He wants Grace as a mistress just to while away his lonely time, and not because he loves her sincerely:
This phenomenal girl will be the light of my life while I am at Hintock; and the special beauty of the situation is that our attitude and relations to each other will be purely casual. Socially we can never be intimate. Anything like matrimonial intentions towards her, charming as she is, would be absurd. They would spoil the recreative character of such acquaintance. (p.138)

Fitzpiers is guided by mere impulse and selfishness. There is no love involved in his attraction for Grace. He is a hypocrite, a master of deceptions. His fundamental error in his relation to Grace and Little Hintock is that he views others from a background of chimerical notions and ideas. Richard Bernstein in his book *The New Constellation: The Ethical or Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* argues that we have an ethical obligation to try to understand the other, not simply in our terms but so as to recognize the “singularity” of the other although we may fail to do justice to the “alterity of the other.” The main conclusion he draws from his reflections is that ours is the ethical ‘responsibility to acknowledge, appreciate, and not to violate the alterity of the Other.’

Both Fitzpiers and Mrs. Charmond try to subsume the other out of existence by the self’s projections. But we need ‘to transcend(our) narcissistic egoism in understanding the alterity of the Other.’ From the postmodern point of view, Dr. Fitzpiers is deluded if he believes in the certainty of his modern identity, for we are certain about nothing. In such a situation he cannot make judgments on the Other. It is the focus of postmodern thought
and Hardy anticipated it in almost all his Major novels. Fitzpiers is an idealist. Even in his pursuit of learning he shifts focus from one topic to another. He leaves an impression of total rootlessness. He is a reckless sensualist. He gives up his future prosperity for momentary pleasures. For instance, his practice at Budmouth is given up for the pleasurable company of Mrs.Charmond at Little Hintock. There is no relationship between his varied interest in learning and the actual life he leads. He is a confused, fragmented personality. He is 'incapable of feeling the reality of any world outside himself, whether it is the woods or the people who live there.'

Mrs.Charmond, like Fitzpiers, is a representative of modern civilization. Like him, she too is a snob, refusing to respect and tolerate the other. In this connection Noorul Hasan makes a very perceptive observation about her: 'Mrs.Charmond is a compliment to the doctor. The two together constitute the anti-ethic of the *The Woodlanders*.' What is the ethic of the novel? It seems to be that when intellectual awareness is not accompanied by an awareness of human and social responsibilities, life can become tragic. Mrs.Charmond is incapable of adjusting herself to her given social context. She is oppressed by the rigidity of traditional Hintock:
The terrible insistencies of society—how severe they are, and cold, and inexorable—ghastly towards those who are made of wax and not of stone. O, I am afraid of them; a stab for this error, and a stab for that—correctives and regulations pretendedly framed that society may tend to ‘perfectio’—an end which I don’t care for in the least. Yet for this all I do care for has to be stunted and starved. (Pp. 204-205)

In this outburst of Mrs. Charmond we can read Hardy’s own protest against some aspects of the Victorian social and moral system. It is eloquently stated when Giles dies for a meaningless social morality. But what Mrs. Charmond fails to understand is that individual happiness or pleasures should not be had at the cost of the other. In her illicit affair with Fitzpiers she is violating another individual’s legitimate right to happiness. When she does not care for others, she cannot expect others to care for her individualistic whims. Her behaviour is socially chaotic.

In Mrs. Charmond’s emotional reaction to the world around her, Hardy reveals the conflict between nature and culture. Mrs. Charmond can neither merge with nor tolerate the values of Little Hintock. She lives like a recluse. The rustic coachman’s observation proves the point: “I have never known her do it before, for as a rule she takes no interest in the village folk at all.” (p. 44) This self-exiled existence is a result of her urban consciousness which disdains the rural form of living. Her whole life and ultimate tragic death are a testimony to the inherent emptiness of a life she
has lived hitherto. Her tragedy is that she does not recognize any form of life outside her own. Besides, she has been deeply involved in egoistic pursuits without any concern for others.

By the time Hardy came to write *The Woodlanders* a lot of changes had taken place in the literary scene as well as in the Victorian social world. According to Urmila Chakraborty, 'the novel in the nineteenth century was the product of a social order and a world view that had been irrevocably lost.' The familiar ordered society is gradually crumbling in *The Woodlanders*. The Arcadian world of *The Woodlanders* will not be able to hold on too long. The tension between the new and the old is too perceptible in the novel:

The nineteenth century novel projected the image of the rounded, individuated, private self, a recognizable being with whom the reader could identify. The twentieth century view of man was at odds with this conception, seeing man as the alienated, fragmented consciousness that he is.

Though Hardy wrote *The Woodlanders* in 1887, his intuitive vision rightly captures the actual state of man in the emerging new world. That is why John Bayley observes:

Hardy’s attitude to consciousness is totally, even disconcertingly, modern. Only his attitude to society is of its time.
Hardy ends *The Woodlanders* with the moving, sentimental words of Marty South. She is not affected by the intrusion of modern consciousness into her traditional community. The values of Hintock are still dear to her. Marty "looked almost like a being who had rejected with indifference the attribute of sex for the loftier quality of abstract humanism."(p.379) Humanism may have dithered around her, but not in Marty. Hardy seems to warn that the deterioration of humanistic values would be a threat to mankind. And it is this absence of humanism which dominates his last two novels-*Tess* and *Jude*. 
References


6. Ibid. p.144.


169


13. Ibid. p.172.


23. Michael Riffaterre, 'Undecidability as Hermeneutic Constraint'
   *Literary Theory Today*, eds. Peter Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan


   (London and Delhi, 1982), p. 85.


    eds. Peter Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan (New York: Cornell

30. Richard Bernstein, quoted by Ron Shiparo in *Surviving

31. Ibid. p. 49.

32. Ian Gregor, *The Great Web: The Form of Hardy's Major Fiction*


35. Ibid. pp.22-23.