Conclusion

Bakhtin observes, ‘In all epochs of their development, festivities of the carnival type have exercised an enormous influence — as yet insufficiently appreciated and researched — on the development of culture as a whole, including literature, several of whose genres and movements have undergone a particularly intense carnivalization.’ (PDP 129)

In this dissertation an attempt has been made to explore the elements of laughter in Thomas Hardy’s novels and short stories and to situate the author in the Carnivalesque tradition of England. Critics have generally responded to Hardy as a writer of tragic fiction, occasionally hinting at the humour of his rustic bystanders. But this brighter side of the writer remains comparatively unexplored.

Hardy delightfully presents the inheritors of the ancient generations of the laughing folk of England, though with a rather chastened exuberance. He never underestimates the laughing people of Wessex who manifested the heritage of the local culture.

Hardy in his essay “The Dorsetshire Labourer” lodges a sharp protest against the depiction of the country folk as the sad, dull, comical
'Hodge'. Again, resentment is voiced in "The Waiting Supper" by the country girl Christine to the presupposition of the globe-trotter Mr Bellston about the 'simple peasants'. Bellston boasts of his ignorance of the English rustic life saying that he is aware 'more of the Parthians, and Medes, and dwellers in Mesopotamia — almost of any people, indeed — than of the English rustics', and takes pride in declaring that 'Travel and exploration are my profession, not the study of the British peasantry' (Collected Stories 599). In the party in his uncle's house the 'self-assured young man' (598), 'to make himself as locally harmonious as possible' (599) comments, 'It does one's heart good [...] to see these simple peasants enjoying themselves' (599). Christine vehemently objects saying 'O Mr Bellston! [...] don't be too sure about that word "simple!" You little think what they see and meditate!' (599). This protest reflects Hardy's own realization of the worth of the earthy wisdom which accompanied the joviality of the hard-working plebeians in the traditional life of the rural Wessex. Bakhtin's significant phrase "clowning wisely" used while reevaluating Rabelais, may be recalled in this context. The rustic people in Hardy's fiction also clown wisely which reminds one of the gravediggers of Hamlet or the porter of Macbeth. There are scenes of hilarious exuberance, of gay abandon, of rogues at their rollicking freaks, of uproarious enjoyment of life in the raw, which obliquely
indicates an eager urgency, a pagan yearning to be absolved from Christian and traditionally social inhibitions. Hawkins's comment in the introduction of *Thomas Hardy: Collected Short Stories* is relevant here:

Hardy's movement away from the gentry in the choice of his leading characters gave added force to his criticism of 'Hodge'—that heartless burlesque of the peasant as a witless oaf, a mere figure of fun little better than a village idiot. When Angel Clare, in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, gets to know the dairy folk at Talbothays as individuals he takes 'a real delight in their companionship. The conventional farm-folk of his imagination — personified in the newspaper press by the pitiable dummy known as Hodge — were obliterated after a few days' residence. At close quarters no Hodge was to be seen.' (xxii)

Critics in general have canonized Hardy as a writer of tragic fiction reflecting a pessimistic outlook. But one may also note the unmistakable presence of the 'sunburnt mirth' which is firmly embedded in the festive exuberance of the Wessex rustics. Usually an emphasis on the tragic protagonists has led to obfuscate the counter-point offered by the plebeian culture which accommodates the multiple voices of the society. In the
present dissertation I have tried to bring out this 'other Hardy' who is lurking behind the traditional image of the 'pessimistic' author.

Hardy conjures up in his fiction that carnivalesque folk-culture of England which had been rapidly disappearing from Wessex life even during his lifetime. An intensive study of his novels and stories shows the existence of uninhibited boisterousness, which is particularly recognizable in his depiction of the rustic chorus who display a blithe response to the major and minor events and affairs occurring around them. Through the joviality of these commoners Hardy endeavours to recapture the joyous tradition of the carnivalesque. It is obvious that in Hardy's fiction the mirth is not manifest in the original Dionysian gusto, and is displayed in a comparatively chastened form. Nevertheless, it is present there, veiled as it may be. This element of laughter infuses a unique flavour to his fiction. Though the constraints of the Victorian social conservativeness would not allow displaying the Saturnalian excesses to the fullest extent which is essentially unconstrained in respect of illustration of exotic pleasure, Hardy evokes the carnival ardour to a considerable extent by including the ingredients of Bacchanalian mirth like dance, song, eating and drinking. That his novels and stories are located in a rural backdrop of a vanishing past, proves
particularly congenial to this mirth; and the characters who bring out this jollity are traditionally the custodians and practitioners of the carnival spirit.

In spite of remaining far from affluence, and struggling for survival in their day-to-day existence, these plebeians yet evince an indomitable spirit and thus serve to provide a kind of comic catharsis in Hardy’s fiction. Whenever situation permits, they indulge in collective merriment by taking an interim leave from the strenuous everyday schedule. The venue may be an inn, or around a bonfire, or even a stretch of land under the open sky; the occasion may be a wedding feast, or Maypole celebration or even the homecoming of a neighbour. Whatsoever be the occasion for rejoicing, the rustics, unlike the protagonists and their social superiors, display their ability to enjoy life despite their everyday ordeals. It is not possible to appreciate their gaiety from the perspective of ‘high’ culture. They seem to illustrate the spirit of *carpe diem* when they participate in these revelries. They do not bother for any sophistication in their merrymaking; rather, the simple material abundance of festive occasions provides them with the ‘kick’ for gay abandon.

The rustic chorus of Hardy also carries the unmistakable mark of the carnival disposition of subverting authority, profaning the sacrosanct, uncrowning heroism, and laughing at death. This corroborates to the
Bakhtinean interpretation of the carnival celebration as a way to overcome the fear of the authority, the church, the hell, the plague and the serious; during festive occasions the participants poke fun even at the king or the church, or other ‘panopticon’ powers. But Hardy’s laughing people scarcely indulge in parodic laughter. By their irrepressible merriment they consistently bring out the possibility of approaching life from a happier perspective. Thus their exuberance may appropriately be placed in the proper carnival tradition of England.

The plebeians of Hardy perform the function of providing comic relief to the sombre fiction of the author on the one hand; on the other, with their considerably rich gift of laughter they also offer a sharp contrast to the mournful fate-afflicted protagonists who suffer alone and wither forlorn.

Laughter in Hardy is chiefly verbal in essence and counts for its effect on the specific utterances employed by the author or the characters. The speeches of some of the rustics carry a charming flavour. Even the Elizabethan bent for the macabre is revealed on occasions as in A Pair of Blue Eyes and The Mayor of Casterbridge reminding us of the grave-diggers in Hamlet or Dame Quickly in King Henry IV. The reader perceives a universality and immortal proverbial quality in the utterances of the simple villagers. While in the carnival mood, they defy even the overwhelming
power of death, and resembling the plebeians of the Carnivalesque tradition they seem to assert the ingrained inference of the cycle of regeneration.

It is noticeable, however, that in some of his novels, particularly in his last three, Hardy restricts the jovial presentation of his rustics to a considerable extent. Cecil observes, ‘In his last two big novels, “Tess” and “Jude”, he leaves them out. And they lose by it’ (94). Actually, however, even these two novels retain traces of the mirth, though considerably enfeebled. This enfeeblement may be related to several causes: the unease and tension in the author’s own conjugal life, or more importantly owing to the annual migration of the rustics to the industrial towns, and the consequent uprooting of the country folk leading to the loss of their ‘humorous simplicity [...] under the constant attrition of lives mildly approximating to those workers in a manufacturing town’ (Orel 180). In his seminal essay The Dorsetshire Labourer Hardy however admits, ‘It is too much to expect them to remain stagnant and old-fashioned for the pleasure of romantic spectators’ (Orel 181).

Nevertheless the impulse of the carnivalesque can be felt through the oeuvre of Hardy’s fiction right from his second novel (Under the Greenwood Tree) till his eleventh (The Woodlanders), and this spirit
abounds in some of his short stories as well. Even in his ‘last’ novels the elements of laughter can be traced to a considerable extent.

At the outset of my dissertation, in ‘The Premise’ (Chapter I) I have shown the place assigned to laughter in the society and literature of Europe in general and England in particular, through the ages. This has been done to situate Hardy’s jovial rustics in the proper carnival tradition of England.

Hardy’s second novel Under the Greenwood Tree, which has been explored in the 2nd chapter, incorporates exuberant festivity and laughter and brings out the author’s optimistic view. The cheerful rustics of Mellstock evince the continuation of carnival disposition even in the nineteenth century England.

The third chapter examines A Pair of Blue Eyes to show the simple genial humour of the rustics who also indulge in ‘decrowning’ their social superiors, the church, and even death.

The ability of the rural folk to revel on festive occasions despite their day-to-day ordeals is highlighted in the fourth chapter which attempts an in-depth study of Far from the Madding Crowd. The plebeians’ boozing and rejoicing serve the purpose of comic relief in the tragic texture of this ‘Wessex’ novel.
The Return of the Native has been intensively probed in the fifth chapter to bring out the carnival spirit still existent in rural England. The spirit is manifested by the commoners through riotous dance around the bonfires and the Maypoles.

The sixth chapter analyses The Trumpet-Major to exhibit the continuation of carnival merriment even at a moment of national concern and tension. Even in the face of the threat of Napoleonic invasion, the rustics indulge in carnival jocundity.

A scrutiny of The Mayor of Casterbridge in the seventh chapter shows the carnival features of 'uncrowning' death and celebrating life. It also proves the Casterbridgians' ability to enjoy life collectively even when the protagonists suffer alone and perish alone.

The eighth chapter explores The Woodlanders, which may be considered Hardy's last novel to manifest elaborately the uninhibited buoyance of carnival laughter. Despite their strenuous profession of bark-ripping the rustic bystanders of Little Hintock evince extraordinary hilarity whenever merry occasions arise.

Hardy's novels other than those analyzed in the previous chapters are probed in the ninth chapter to show a thin trickle of laughter flowing even through these tragic novels. Though these novels do not manifest
boisterous or wild merriment, the joviality here lends a perspective to the tragic plots of these novels. The survey of these fictional works also illustrates that the elements of laughter in Hardy’s works do not follow any specific pattern, i.e., there is no gradual development or decline of carnival mirth. This ebb and flow of the elements of merriment bring out the ‘other’, the brighter, side of the so-called ‘pessimistic’ writer.

Many of Hardy’s short stories reverberate with the carnival jollity of the rustics. In the tenth chapter, some of these stories, which also resemble the traditional English ballads, have been explored to show the exuberant laughter of the simple folk.

Hardy recaptures the bygone generations of laughing people of rural Wessex through his nostalgic depiction of the dance, song and ‘sunburnt mirth’ of the plebeians’ carnival, as it is carried on by ‘obscure’ people in the remote ‘woodlands’ and ‘heaths’, ‘far [far away] from the madding [city] crowd’.