Preface

When I first read Thomas Hardy’s (1840-1928) novels I could not help being impressed by the way he develops a sense of tragic determinism, his images which are more than decorative and of course his representation of women. Later, when I was asked to make an assessment of the representation of female sexuality in his novels, I felt that I was required to develop an understanding of what is traditionally described as the man-woman relationship to unfold the complexities of women’s exploitation under patriarchy. This is because in Hardy’s novels female sexuality, existing within the compass of heterosexual encounters is defined in relation to the male gaze. Therefore, this study offers an analysis of the interpersonal relationships in Hardy’s novels to observe how women defined as the negative other, internalise the mid-Victorian conceptualisation of gender and also protest against the patriarchal stereotypes. Though Hardy often perpetuates the reductive generalisations about women prevalent in the Victorian era, his profound understanding of the dilemma of women is expressed in the ways he highlights their struggle for self-actualization in a hostile, patriarchal set-up. The ideas of feminist theorists and literary critics are, therefore, crucial determinants in the shaping of this study which analyses the repressive ideology of domesticity emerging in the nineteenth century as well as the ways women, as flesh and blood individuals, attempt to disrupt and subvert the male hegemony. However, the fact remains that, caught in a vicious network of mutual objectification, the masculine subjects and women remain disturbed and unhappy in Hardy’s novels. The theoretical findings of thinkers like Martin Buber (1878-1965), Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973) and Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) are also used in this study to suggest that it is because of their inability to negate egotism that Hardy’s characters fail to treat the interpersonal relationship as a site of transcendence.