CHAPTER - VII

CONCLUSION

The study of Thomas Hardy's poetry in the preceding chapters makes it clear that Hardy's poetry develops the tenets of existentialism. Though Hardy had not heard of the term existentialism, as a sensitive poet he was able to capture the spirit of existentialism which was very much in the air during his lifetime. In this sense, Hardy is a modern writer though he was born and brought up during the 19th century. In most of his creative writing Hardy is preoccupied with one of the important phenomena of modern time that is the theme of alienation and search for identity. Hardy's poetry depicts vividly how the conditions of life lead an individual to a state of isolation on the biological, social and personal levels.

Though Hardy does not condemn the advance of science and technology, he possesses a greater love and veneration for the pre-scientific world where man and Nature co-existed in harmonious relationship. Hardy's Nature poems written before he came under the impact of new faith, exclusively show the healthy attachment between man and Nature. Against this background, man lives in perfect harmony with natural environment, and feels a sense of spiritual togetherness. However, with the advancement of science, the evils such as mechanization and materialism change man's attitude towards his natural surroundings. Man
separated himself from Nature with a view to control her for his material prosperity and comfort which modern science promised him. Man's estrangement and isolation from Nature is not just a result of his life in cities but one of a drastic change in his outlook on Nature.

Hardy's approach to Nature is characterized by change in keeping with his emotional attitudes. Earlier he believed that Nature provided man spiritual satisfaction. He thought that those who saw Nature with love and veneration as conscious being, would surely feel an elevation of the spirit. Therefore, according to Hardy man must consider Nature his companion in order to ease his own mental tensions. The importance that Hardy attaches to harmonious relationship between Man and Nature, aligns him with the theistic existentialist thinkers. Like the theistic existentialist thinker Karl Jaspers, Hardy advocates an 'I-Thou' relationship between man and Nature. Hardy's predilection to view Nature with a spiritual eye and not merely through the physical eye, is significant:

SHOW Thee as I thought thee
When I early sought thee,

Hardy's advice to man as it is conveyed through his protagonists is that man should choose an attitude of love, sympathy, friendship and veneration towards Nature.

1. Thomas Hardy, Wessex Poems and Other Verses, op. cit., p.61.
If man approaches Nature with such attitude, according to Hardy, he will be blessed with spiritual comfort, joy, consolation and contentment. Hardy thinks that the adverse impact of industrialization and scientism frustrates man's desires to establish a healthy relationship with his natural milieu.

Hardy also emphasizes the alienation of man from society, when he finds a disruption both in familial and community life. This is because of the clash and conflict caused between an individual and community. Man's ambition, greed and enmity counteracts his desire to attain consolation and contentment in family life. As a result, when man tries to be happy in society, the society which does not care for life-generating values, hinders the path of progress of an individual. Consequently, the individual feels like a powerless entity in the increasingly complex world. Subsequently, an individual who is in quest of self hood is alienated from society. This aspect of human existence is depicted in Hardy's poems 'Wessex Heights', and 'In Tenebris' I, II and III.

The protagonist of the poem 'Wessex Heights' observes that in the community in which he has been living so far, he has no comrades. He thinks the people who were once his kith and kin and dear ones now look 'dubious and askance'. The people in society are like phantoms of 'weird detective ways', and 'they say harsh heavy things'. Therefore, he is at home on the lonely Wessex heights:
So I am found on Ingpen Beacon, or on Wylls-Neck to the west, 
Or else on homely Bulbarrow, or little Pilsdon Crest, 
Where men have never cared to haunt, nor women have walked with me, 
And ghosts then keep their distance; and I know some liberty.²

The protagonist tired of his life on the 'great grey plain', i.e. society, moves away from it altogether. He goes to the great lonely heights where he finds life happier and endurable.

In a similar spirit, the protagonists of the poems 'In Tenebris' are unhappy. They are unhappy, not because, Nature is indifferent to their misery and suffering, but because of the inhuman behavior of man to man, woman and others. This aspect of man’s cruelty, enmity and malevolence even towards his fellow-beings is evident in the following lines of the poem 'In Tenebris' II:

Let him in whose ears the low-voiced Best is killed by the clash of the First, 
Who holds that if way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst, 
Who feels that delight is a delicate growth cramped by crookedness, custom, and fear, 
Get him up and be gone as one shaped awry; he disturbs the order here.³

². Thomas Hardy, Satires of Circumstance. Lyrics and Reveries. op.cit., p. 320.
³. Thomas Hardy, Poems of the Past and the Present., op. cit., p. 168.
Here, the 'Worst' is suffering, mortality, change, death -- everything is senseless and meaningless in this wastelandian indifferent modern world of science and commerce. Even though, Hardy cannot think of reconciling man to his predicament, he records it vividly. His aim was simply to 'humbly recording diverse readings of life's phenomena as they are forced upon him'. The same theme is continued in the first and the third poems of the name 'In Tenebris'.

Hardy fought throughout his life against cruelty to living beings both big and small, human beings and animals. He declares that what he wrote is nothing, but 'one plea against man's inhumanity to man, woman and lower creatures'. Hardy criticises society for its inhuman treatment of individuals in terms of social morals. According to Hardy, a healthy society is neither moral, nor immoral but amoral. Like the existentialist thinkers such as Kierkegaard and Sartre who condemn the power of the multitude or society which smothers all that is authentic, beautiful and individualistic, Hardy too is extremely critical of the crowd as a threat to individual liberty.

Hardy depicts vividly the terror an individual feels for the crowd in many of his poems. In a sense, Hardy's work foreshadows Franz Kafka's novel The Trial. The hero of Kafka's novel, Joseph K is exploited by the masses in the name of the justice, and he becomes a victim of social and moral disorders.
The depressing conditions of human existence lead man to a state of self-alienation. The disparity between what man aspires to become and what he can do, causes a serious threat to the integrity of his selfhood. Hardy depicts this aspect of human existence through his characters in the poems 'Wessex Heights', 'The Milk Maid' and the three poems of the Latin name 'In Tenebris'. The philosophy of existentialism considers self-alienation as a grave condition of modern man.

Self-alienation, which is a major theme in modern psychology, is a tragic phenomenon in Hardy's poems. As many of Hardy's people neither desire to admit defeat nor wish to commit suicide, they remain in a state of mental tumult and moral tensions. Such conditions may make many wish to put an end to life; induce some to decide to defy society even at the cost of their lives; but incite only a few to withstand the trials and tribulations and succeed in life.

It has been noticed that Hardy does not approve of the idea of suicide, because it proves man's inherent cowardice. Men, like the protagonists of the poems 'Wessex Heights' and 'In Tenebris', do not desire to live in society, instead they alienate themselves from it and live in solitude. With their principle of stoic-resignation and inner resources, they try to harmonise their lives in order to achieve transcendental bliss. In fact, they succeed in their quest for selfhood even in the face of glaring misfortunes.
Hardy’s humanism, which is evident in his men and women who despite their separation from their homeland, Nature and human solidarity, finds a code of conduct and a way of life that amply ensures them consolation and contentment. The way, his protagonists pursue peace, prosperity, health, happiness and transcendental bliss, lead them to ‘life-loyalty’.

Hardy’s disbelief in the Christian faith stems from the assumption that Christianity is full of dogmas and rituals which are outdated, meaningless and harmful. According to Hardy, religion has degenerated. For example Hardy’s protagonists portrayed in poems, like 'Hap', 'Bedridden Peasant' and 'New Year’s Eve', as earlier noted are deeply troubled when their desires and endeavours are thwarted by some unknown powers which Hardy names as God, Crass Casualty, Fate, Destiny, Immanent Will and so on.

Hardy’s scathing criticism of religion and God has its counterpart in the philosophy of existence. Kierkegaard, the founder of existentialism has criticized the notions of Christian charity and loving-kindness, while Nietzsche has announced the death of God, and Sartre declares even if God exists no ethical principles could be deduced from his existence, as man and God pass each other by without touching.

Thus religion and God, which curtail man’s freedom, discourage him from action and responsibility. They
fail to satisfy his thirst for peace and consolation.

When all means of transcendence, such as Nature, Society or the loved ones become useless, Hardy thinks that man can take recourse only to his self, which in the absence of God, and any aid from outside, can provide him choice and responsibilities. Indeed, it is a form of revolt against God and Society.

Hardy is not an atheist, but he blames God for His indifference towards human misery and suffering. As it has already been noted in the poem 'Hap', mentioned above, God does not assist man in his hours of crises. Therefore, Hardy does not believe in God's benevolence.

Hardy does not consider man an insignificant entity in the world which is alien to him. Instead, he considers man a conscious entity who can live independently, without any assistance from forces beyond himself.

Hardy commands our attention, because through his tragic protagonists he portrays human existence — an existence in which, man alienates himself from Nature, from society and from his own self. His depiction of life as reflected in his poems shows an important phenomenon of human existence that is 'man is mace to live, and he is called to die, and life offers to deny!' He considers pain, suffering and death as characteristic features of human existence.
However, man's self-alienation is not a grave danger to his self-realization because self-alienation leads to self-examination, which in turn gives him better perspective of his existence. Man's desire to attain the status which he best deserves, can be fulfilled by his right choice, heroic action and responsibility. He can achieve his good, viz, his selfhood if his relationship harmonizes with his biological environment, society and his own inner self.

Hardy believes in man's right conscience which, according to him, enables every human being to make the right choice and act accordingly. He thinks that whatever man does — whether man helps or harms, pleases or teases or does anything at all depends upon his consciousness and self-awareness. Indeed self-consciousness is very important for man's commitments.

Hardy thinks that courage and confidence are necessary to man for his attainment of self-hood. He questions how a man, who is not courageous enough, can dare and act in a worthwhile manner in life. In fact, in Hardy's vision of life, man must possess enquiring spirit, courage, confidence, determination and dedication.

In a similar spirit, like Sartre, Hardy believes in action. Like Sartre, the atheist existentialist thinker, Hardy thinks that man is a sum total and grand result of his actions. He will be what he dares and does. In Hardy's view, actions that are good and great find an important place
in life. As Ortega Y Gasset thinks a book is made of pages, Hardy thinks life is made of actions and situations. Indeed, man's character is said to evolve from the way he acts and responds to the situations of his life.

Thus in Hardy's scheme of things man is a significant entity in the universe. Man can attain whatever he desires by sheer dint of right choice, action and responsibility. In fact, he can attain transcendental bliss if he lives in perfect harmony with his biological environment, material world and inner self.

The creative artist Hardy considered himself a meliorist thinker as he believed in the gradual evolution of man. In his poems he depicts how man alienates himself from Nature, Society and Himself because of his critical attitude towards life. After an analysis of his relationship with Nature, Society and Himself, he realizes a new adjustment is possible in the light of the knowledge he has gained in the process. At the end of this experience, man finds himself better because he has come to transcend his individual limitations. In this sense, the Hardian characters come nearer to the Nietzschean idea of superman.