

Sense Of Existential Estrangement And Loneliness In Thomas Hardy's 'Novels Of Character And The Environment'

¹Dr. Lokesh Kumar

¹Associate Professor English, Govt. College, Gonda, Iglas Aligarh (UP), India

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Abstract

In Hardy's novels human helplessness in face of the conditioning forces of existence has been portrayed vividly. Hardy, in almost all of his novels, seems to convey that pain and disappointment constitute an integral part of human existence in the world. Estrangement or alienation is a multidimensional term used in many disciplines such as Sociology, Economics, Psychology, Law, Political Science and Medicine etc. however, the term has been used here in a limited sense which simply implies an individual's sense of non-belongingness and exclusion in social relations, and his estrangement from society and its culture.

Keywords:- Existential, Estrangement, Loneliness, Alienation, Social Injustice, Discrimination, Isolation, Frustration.

Introduction

Thomas Hardy has been admired as a great writer in the world of literature particularly for his unequalled skill in describing the rural scene and for his creation of the semi-fictional region, Wessex, full of a host of attractive characters; and moreover for his pessimistic philosophy. He finds that no loving God takes care of the world and man finds himself alone and in exile in such a world. On account of his dark vision of the world and life and his disturbing views of morality Hardy has been criticized as a heretic, an atheist, a pessimist or a determinist. In their criticism of Hardy the critics seem to have been failed to see that Hardy attempts to see clearly and realistically the human predicament in a universe devoid of all metaphysical meaning. But in the twentieth century most of the philosophers and psychologists have particularly noted the anguish, loneliness and sense of existential estrangement in human psyche. What Hardy seems to feel a century ago has become a common experience of all the sensitive persons at present. It has been attempted here to trace the existential and social estrangement or alienation in human life as represented in Hardy's novels. According to *The Encyclopaedia of philosophy*:

In everyday usage alienation often means turning away or keeping away from former friends or associates.... In psychiatry alienation usually means deviation from normality; that is, insanity. In contemporary psychology and sociology it is often used to name an individual's feelings of alienness toward society, nature other people, or himself. For many sociologists and philosophers, alienation is the same as reification: the act(or result of the act) of transforming human properties, relations, and actions into properties and actions of things which are independent of man and which govern his life. For other philosophers "alienation" means "self-alienation" (self-

estrangement) the process, or result of the process, by which a “self” (God or man) through itself (through its own action) becomes alien (strange) to itself (to its own nature).” (*The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 1, 76)

Hegel, Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx were the first to explain and expound the term alienation at length and comprehensively. The twentieth century thinkers and visionaries have explained alienation in terms of individual isolation, frustration, non-belongingness, and impersonality. The term alienation can be treated as a multidimensional and multi-faceted phenomenon. However, it has been used here referring to an individual’s sense of non-belongingness and exclusion in social relations, and estrangement from society and its culture.

Hardy’s personal experiences of life offer a plausible explanation for the presence of alienation in his literary works. An artist’s temperamental make-up is important in framing and determining his experienced based vision of life. As Hardy himself says, “A writer who is not a mere imitator looks upon the world with his personal eyes, and in his particular moods; thence grows up his style, in the full sense of the term.”(Quoted, P.J. Casagrande, 12) Hardy himself, in his own personal life, felt the experiences of alienation and estrangement. As a result pessimism became the habit of his thought. In 1862 Hardy had to depart for London to pursue the art and science of architecture. As he was deeply attached, like any common human being, to his native place Higher Bockhampton, he felt as if he had been spiritually defied by leaving the purity of Dorset for the corruption of London. Hardy’s bitter experiences of personal life made him feel isolated and alienated in the world. Hardy’s own studies and contemporary scientific discoveries seem to influence his delicate sensibility tremendously. Undoubtedly, it can be said that his artistic inspiration sprouted out of his isolation and disappointing and bitter experiences of life.

Hardy categorises his novels in three categories, ‘Novels of Character and Environment’, ‘Romances and Fantasies’, and ‘Novels of Ingenuity’. The first category ‘Novels of Character and Environment’ include *Under the Greenwood Tree*, *Far From the Madding Crowd*, *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *The Woodlanders*, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*. In *Under the Greenwood Tree* we see the church singers who are alienated in the sense that they feel themselves redundant and powerless on account of their replacement or rather displacement by the barrel organ. Another character Fancy is at a remove from the rural people on account of her education; and disruptive effects of her superior education are felt throughout the novel. She is thought to be responsible for the fall of the traditional order and she is associated with the pressures making for social change. To quote Norman Page, “...it will hardly do to characterize *Under the Greenwood Tree* as a simple tale of bygone rural felicity: paradise has not yet been lost, but the warning signs are beginning to appear, and can be read in retrospect.” (Norman Page, 61)

In *Far From the Madding Crowd* Hardy portrays the world of farming. Troy, a local Weatherbury man, has been considered as a threat to the stable and settled agricultural community of his native place. He fails to integrate with the rural community and is dissociated from its values, manners and occupations. He has been presented as a rootless and an estranged alien, who contributes nothing to the society and is out of tune with its values and ways of life. His immoral conduct estranges him from his wife Bathsheba too. Boldwood is a competent farmer but he is withdrawn and seems to

lack integration with local society. He becomes secluded and aloof and withdraws into himself after Troy's marriage with Bathsheba. His estrangement and distance from the mainstream of social atmosphere can be beheld in the fact that he does not play the role of the local squire which normally he should have done.

In *The Return of the Native* the ache of loneliness and the pangs of estrangement are too obvious to escape attention. Egdon Heath itself symbolises cosmic indifference to man. Eustacia Vye, the heroine of the novel, is a girl of romantic temperament, whose penchant for splendid and glamorous urban life does not accord with the dry and harsh heath-life, as she considers it to be. She says, "I cannot endure the heath, except in its purple season. The heath is a cruel task master to me." (*The Return of the Native*, 220) Her zest for a glamorous life and her higher demands for happiness, amid the insipid surroundings of heath, make her adopt a non-sharing attitude and she becomes a stranger to all local gatherings. Like Eustacia, there is another character Wildeve, who is also a newcomer to the heath and he, too, abhors the heath-life. He seems to be a non-productive, negative and rootless figure on heath. On the contrary, Clym, the protagonist, who has come from Paris, has a harmony with the heath and belongs to the native community of the heath. Eustacia estranges herself from Wildeve, whom she loves, and starts loving Clym, not because of his qualities but just because of his association with Paris. Ultimately she marries him with a belief that she would be able to persuade Clym, who has returned back from Paris to teach and educate the people of the heath, to go back to Paris to live a romantic and glamorous life there. As the result she gets disillusioned and her wish to enjoy the delights of Parisian life gets frustration and this disenchantment of her expectations causes serious breach in their relations. Clym and Eustacia are alienated from each other following the incident of door-shutting against his mother and the rough treatment received by Eustacia at his hands. Eustacia is also the root cause of Clym's separation from his mother. He marries Eustacia against his mother's wishes and he is compelled to dwell in a cottage away from his mother's house. Mrs. Yeobright, Clym's mother, also finds herself in a state of estrangement after her fruitless efforts to mend her relations with her sons. The door-shutting incident breaks her heart and she feels that she has been cast off by her son. She wants to live no longer in the world and dies on the heath.

The Mayor of Casterbridge is mainly concerned with the growth and downfall of the career of the hero of the novel, Michael Henchard and ultimately his existential estrangement and alienation. Thinking his family to be a hindrance in his way of making a fortune he auctions his wife, Susan. The auction of his wife causes an emotional void in Henchard's life. This emotional void and loneliness of Henchard prompt him to take the much younger Farfrae into his confidence. But Farfrae's growing popularity and later on his rivalry with Henchard in the field of business and love alienate him from his patron Henchard. Henchard's indifference and coldness to Elizabeth Jane following the disclosure that Newson is her real father drives her away from him. Henchard loses all people, who have been objects of his affection, one by one, and is destined to die as an estranged and a lonely man. Being rejected by the Casterbridge society Henchard starts feeling himself to be a rootless and an estranged person with an existential crisis; and leaves this society in his workman's clothes. His anguish can be felt when he says, "...I-cain-go alone as I deserve—an outcast and a vagabond. But my punishment is not greater than I can bear!" (*The Mayor of Casterbridg*, 307) Henchard fails as a family man, friend and lover and is isolated from society to live a secluded life. All of his relationships are gone for his selfish and

aggressive behaviour. With the disclosure of his past he loses his social prestige too. Consequently, he becomes a self-estranged fellow regarding himself as an existentially rootless person and as an insignificant entity in the world. His suicide attempt and finally, his conclusive will can be taken as proof of his existential estrangement and loneliness.

The Woodlanders appears to be depicting, comprehensively, how a simple, natural and pastoral world can be affected by sophistication and modernity. The novel has two sets of characters i.e., native woodlanders and urban personages. Felice Charmond and Dr. Fitzpiers have been presented as alien intruders who disturb the placid and simple life of the village community. Hardy portrays Felice Charmond as a restless and rootless woman, who lives at Hintock House in self-imposed isolation. The villagers consider her as a strange woman, “She’s the wrong sort of woman for Hintock—hardly knowing a beech from a woak.” (*The Woodlanders*, 255) Feeling it to be dull to live in the placid surroundings of Hintock Mrs. Charmond does not have any real human relationship with the local people. Both Mrs. Charmond and Fitzpiers, also an outsider in the rural atmosphere of Hintock, are non-productive characters and they have predatory relationship with the native dwellers. Fitzpiers, too, is a remove from the rural activities and natural life style of the country folk. Throughout the novel he remains adhered to his own fantasies and caprices. Grace Melbury’s education alienates her from her social milieu. On account of her superior education and acquaintance with the outside world she loses her simplicity and develops egotism and snobbery. Being attracted by the hypnotic personality of Fitzpiers, she marries him and deserts her old lover Giles Winterborne. But soon the realisation of Fitzpiers’ immoral conduct fills her with hatred against him. In fact, their incompatible social and cultural backgrounds are responsible for their estrangement from each other. Though Fitzpiers and Grace are reunited towards the end of the novel, their reunion results, only, in the latter’s banishment from the Little Hintock community.

Tess of the d’Urbervilles is an account of the ruination of a good and humane character by society and fateful circumstances. Tess, who is a victim of Alec’s lust, faces criticism of a hostile society for no fault of her own. Being scorned for her misfortunes, she remains estranged and cut off from the people of Marlott; and decides to leave her village for Talbothays to work as a milkmaid. The Vicar also refuses to baptize her dying child. Thus, Tess is scorned, estranged and left unprotected by her society as well as religion. Tess suffers existential estrangement and loneliness in her society because of orthodox conventional moral code of conduct that puts too much emphasis on physical purity. For violating this conventional moral code of conduct by bearing a child before marriage, Tess’ family is evicted from the village. Conventional morality seems to be the arch enemy of Tess throughout the novel. Angel Clare, her husband, estranges and deserts Tess, when he comes to know about her unfortunate past i.e., her seduction by Alec. Angel Clare projects himself as a liberal and a man of rational attitude. But his refusal to forgive Tess exposes his pseudo-liberalism and the hidden ingrained Victorian conventional morality in his nature. In fact, Angel’s estrangement from Tess is a result of idealisation. As in *Thomas Hardy: His Career as a Novelist* Michael Millgate observes, “If Alec sacrifices Tess to his lust, Angel sacrifices her to his theory of womanly purity. The one obeys a natural law, the other a social law, and Hardy has no hesitation in assigning to the latter the greater blame.” (Michael Millgate, 276) Alec, who is responsible for Tess’ untold misfortunes and miseries, is estranged and cut off from his society and

community because of his unforgivable act of seducing a girl. At the land of Marlott he has to assume a false name, to live there, losing his existential identity.

Jude the Obscure has an urban setting. According to Irving Howe it is "...woven from the materials of historical change, the transformation and uprooting of traditional English life." (Irving Howe, 138) The novel portrays psychological dilemma of the characters who estrange and deviate from the traditional modes of social behaviour. Being an orphan, Jude Fawley, the protagonist of the novel, feels himself to be rootless, estranged, unworthy and in existential crisis in this world; and to overcome this inner crisis with a desire to live an intellectually and morally better life and to become a learned man, he leaves his native place Marygreen for Christminster, a seat of university. But his ambition to get education at Christminster is shattered when he has to face discrimination and social remoteness for belonging to the poor and the lower class of the society. He is denied admission and advised to stick to stone masonry. He feels estranged and alienated from the prejudiced society which is not ready to recognize his talent. Not only this, he has to suffer estrangement and alienation in his married life also. His mismatched marriage with Arabella causes tragic experiences for him. Arabella is a coquettish woman, and sensuality seems to be the hall mark of her personality. Finding it almost impossible to live with such a coarse wife as Arabella is, Jude snaps off his relations with her.

Jude's estrangement from Arabella drives him into the arms of Sue Bredehead, who is woman of sharp intellect and sensitivity. Jude thinks her to be an ideal match for him; because both of them do not approve of the idea of marriage as a legal ceremony. Jude says, "The intention of the contract is good, and right for many, no doubt; but in our case it may defeat its own ends because we are the queer sort of people, we are folk in whom domestic ties of a forced kind snuff out cordiality and spontaneousness." (*Jude the Obscure*, 341) On account of their unorthodox and unconventional life style Jude and Sue feel a sense of estrangement and exclusion in social relationships. Throughout his career Jude remains estranged and without community; and he as a self-estranged man who curses the day when he was born. Another character Little Father Time is seems to be a symbol of existential estrangement born of modern conditions of social order. He is a mouthpiece of the children who do not receive whole-hearted affection and find their life to be unwanted and neglected. The novel shows that those whose behaviour is contrary to traditional social conventions are bound to suffer and feel estranged and isolated in society.

Thus, we can see a sense of existential estrangement and loneliness in all the novels, which have been discussed here, of Thomas Hardy. No doubt, Hardy's pessimistic philosophy is all pervasive in all the novels, his sense of alienation, too, has been portrayed comprehensively. The novelist seems to convey a message that the weakening of communal ties, social discrimination and apathy, excessive individualism and mismatching of the opposite temperaments create feelings of estrangement, loneliness, desperation and seclusion in life.

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