PERCEPTION OF NATURE IN THOMAS HARDY’S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

In English Literature, Nature is portrayed to be loving, inspiring, kindly and friendly in its stature and grandeur. While my detailed research on Thomas Hardy, I found that he is the person who portrayed Nature as an inspiring and compassionate element for the enrichment of human existence in his early poems. Nature is conducive to human existence and content in his life. Hardy’s earlier poems are chiefly nature poems where nature is depicted as a companion of human beings. However, in his later poems we find that Nature become indifferent to the existence of mankind and its sufferings. Hence he not only appreciated its beauty and generosity but also highlighted malevolent aspect of nature, after it having been exploited rather ruthlessly by mankind. He sees both the good and the evil sides of Nature. The malicious aspect of Nature is touched rarely. Hardy portrayed the helplessness of men in the face of natural calamities.

A detailed examination of Hardy’s poetry reveals his exploration of man’s suffering amid Nature - a suffering mainly caused by man’s own materialistic way of life. Hardy, a keen observer of the disturbance in the natural environment has clearly depicted man’s destruction of Nature’s wealth. Therefore, Hardy stated that the man must treat Nature as a living being that will make his existence perpetually sustainable Man’s existence can be successful only if he is sufficiently devoted towards conservation of natural environment.

Key Words : Eternal, Nature, Humanist, Companion, Neutrality.

INTRODUCTION

In English Literature be it poetry or prose, Nature is stated to be, loving, inspiring, kind, friendly, glorious, sublime in its stature and grandeur. Nature is basically made to support all forms of life on earth. This is shown by her eternal cycle of production, reproduction and magnanimous presence. Environment is a renewable source of man’s livelihood, shelter, contentment, health and happiness. Environment is also the promoter of harmonious human existence as well as destroyer of ugly aspects of life.

Poets, whether of Romantic Age or Modern Age, highlighted the value and importance of Thomas Hardy, man encompassed by biological and social environment, search for a peaceful and productive way of life. As a matter of course, in the trials and tribulations they seek consolation and contentment amid the things of environment. However, their success or failure of attainment of selfhood in their surroundings largely depends upon their mode of relationship with their environment.

METHODOLOGY

In detailed and minute study of Hardy’s poetry, I have adopted sociological view in my research paper by finding the relationship of
man with nature, his helplessness amidst nature, his suffering in natural calamities. During the process of development of literature, the development of society is also shown in the writings of Hardy. In this research paper, the mutual interdependence of the society and the nature is highlighted. To judge the creations of Hardy and its position in world of English Literature, the comparative approach is also used in the research paper. The approach of Hardy is compared to other authors and poets of English Literature, so that the objective of research is fulfilled.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thomas Hardy apart from being a novelist, was famous poet also. His few collections of poetry are Wessex Poems and other Verses (1998). Poems of the Past and the Present (1902), Satires of Circumstance, Lyrics and Reveries (1914), Moments of vision and Miscellaneous Versus (1917), Late Lyrics and Earlier (1922), Human Shares, For Phantasies: Songs and Trifles (1925). The Complete Poems.

Hardy's earlier poems are chiefly nature poems where environment is depicted as a companion of human beings. He provides a broad and idealistic setting of Nature as the background in his early poems. He says its beauty and bounty turn human life happier and endurable. According to him, the availability and abundance of peace, tranquility, wealth and joy in environment turn human life happier and endurable.

Right from Hardy's earliest poem Domicilium written in 1858, we see his preoccupation with environment's flora and fauna. His beautiful Nature poem Weathers displays how man's harmonious and fruitful relationship with Nature is a blend of love, faith, mercy and affection. The poem mirrors man's intimate relationship with environment for help and happiness. The protagonist of the poem lives as happily as Gabriel Oat of 'Far from the Madding Crowd'. In fact, his existence is in perfect with the environment;

"This is the weather the to cuckoo likes
and so do I,
When showers betumble the chestnut spikes,
and nestlings fly."

Another poem Summer Schemes in the collection (LLE)3 reveals man's fruitful co-existence with environment which is better than his mechanical life in Wastelandian world of urbanized towns. Even Domicilium, written in Wordsworthian style, is successful in showing the positive aspects of Man-Nature relationship. It describes how the old cottage was encompassed by high beeches, veil of boughs, apple trees, red roses, lilacs and green fields on hills. The form of life delineated in it are more in harmony with the environment than the life of their modern counterparts. Similarly harmonious existence of the older generations who relied on environment for most of the things is vividly depicted in 'An Unkindly May'. Hardy supported the view that man and biological environment are closely related to each other.

Nevertheless, Nature in Hardy's poems does not appear either a teacher or mother as in Wordsworth poetry. It simply appears as neutral and some times even as indifferent to the existence of human beings.

On a closer examination of Hardy's Nature poems, one more idea strike us and that is his distinction between 'Village Life' and 'City Life'. In Hardy's poetry the difference between the milieu of urban life and rustic life is glaring and manifold. Urban life is depicted as complex, whereas, rustic life is shown as simple, natural, noble and considerably harmonious. His depiction of landscape portrays human existence in the countryside as primarily in consonance with the natural environment. The reason for this harmonious life of the rustics is that they primarily depend on environment for everything. They treat her
as their fellow with love and reverence. In turn, Nature provides everything which the rustic people require. As seen in Hardy’s village, men respect trees, air, earth, rain, wind down and darkness. Life is comfortable to them only when the earth yields abundant crops.

Life in urban areas is quite different. It is artificial, disharmonious and erratic. According to Hardy, this is largely due to impact of industrialization. The advent of Science and Technology has commercialized life and deprived man of his basic attachment to natural environment. This adverse impact has made man independent of natural environment. Hardy thinks there is no greater tragedy than man’s over dependence on machines for everything. Hardy observes that man’s harmonious co-existence with environment has disintegrated. The scientific discoveries and inventions have led to man’s exploitation of Nature for his selfish interests. Man’s knowledge and mastery over natural environment has intensified this process of exploitation of natural surrounding (both in its animate and inanimate forms) for the glorifications of his materialistic way of life. Hardy, a keen observer of the disturbance, in the natural environment has vividly depicted man’s destruction of Nature’s wealth.

The following poem, ‘A Backward Spring’ illustrates how the trees are afraid of human disturbance,

“The trees are afraid to put forth buds
And there is timidity in the grass”.

Another poem ‘Logs on the Hearth’ highlights man’s selfish exploitation of Nature environment neglecting his own good :

“The fire advances along the log
Of the tree we felled,
Sawn, sapless, darkening with root”.

Man’s exploitation of Natural environment has resulted in the pollution of water, weather, sound, soil and all other aspects of congenial atmosphere. Hardy’s poem, ‘Genoa and the Mediterranean’ speaks of the pollution of sea. However, Hardy, the Humanist, asks the sea to put up with the inhumanity of man: O Epic - Famed, god-haunted Central Sea, Heave careless of the deep wrong done to thee.

Man’s merciless hunting of birds is portrayed in the poem, ‘The Bird-Catcher’s Boy’ :

“Larks bruise and bleed in jail
Trying to rise;
Every caged nightingale
Soon pines and dies”.

Hardy was much sensitive and sympathetic towards the animals, birds and creatures. Hardy’s compassion for the dumb birds and beasts is touchingly humane. In the poem, “The Blinded Bird”, which is about the suffering of a blind bird, he asks who can be more charitable and tolerant than this blind bird who sings joyously despite of man and Nature’s indignity:

Who hath charity? This bird.
Who suffereth long and is kinds,
Who thinketh no evil, but sings?

On another occasion when he was invited to the celebration of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty towards Animals in 1924, he wrote an ode called ‘Compassion’. It is a hearty response to the cries still heard in all the secret corners of the world getting no compassionate response from human hearts:

‘But still those innocents are thralls.
To throbless hearts, near for that hear no calls
Of honour towards their too-dependent frail,
How helplessness breeds tyranny
In power above assail’.

Florence, Hardy’s second wife thought that the poem served to demonstrate the poet’s passionate hatred of injustice and barbarity towards the creatures of Nature.
Hardy’s love for Nature led him to the observation of Nature’s workings and its impact on the existence of human beings. As his observation and experience of life grew, his views of ‘Man-Nature’ relationship underwent change. Subsequently, his love and veneration for Nature and his faith in her diminished in proportion to the growth of his thought. This thought is clearly reflected in his later poems.

The poems, ‘The Slow Nature’, ‘The Bride-Night Fire’ and ‘The Subalterns, show Nature’s neutrality towards the misfortunes of human existence. Pain, sickness and death are shown as indivisible parts of natural phenomenon. The important notes of Hardy’s thought are struck here—the suffering and helplessness of man, the inevitability of fate and carelessness of the Nature—all because “——— to model our conduct on Nature’s apparent conduct, ———” can only bring disaster to humanity”. The condition of peasants is not enduring due to natural calamities like floods and droughts.

Hardy questions Nature whether she alleviates the suffering of human beings caused by her:

“When will thou wake,
O Mother, wake and see

Will thou destroy, in one wild shock
of shame.”

They whole high heaving firmamental frame, Or patiently adjust, amend, and heal?”

The poet regrets that Nature, neither adjusts nor amends her infliction of misery on man unwittingly wrought by her calamities. He regrets that instead of consoling the suffering human beings, Nature remains neutral. But man must know the sorrows of Nature and witness the death of her flora and fauna without any superstitions veneration or malignant enmity. Since time immemorial, it is environment which has promoted many generations of life as well as tolerated man’s ruthless atrocities. Against this background of Nature, Hardy states that man must treat natural environment with love, faith, respect and regard, for it supports all aspects of life. If Nature is loved and venerated, man will certainly get fulfillment in her company.

CONCLUSION

When Nature is viewed and explored only for man’s materialistic purposes, when she is ruthlessly exploited and treated as an instrument, man can never get peace, tranquility and spiritual consolation from her. It is true, owing to man’s exploitation of Nature’s resources, there is every possibility of impoverishment of human soul and an utter degradation of human values. Hardy adds that the degrading materialism gives man more pain than pleasure. According to him, Nature persuades us to a world which is devoid of virtues that support human existence. In T.S. Eliot’s (1988-1068) words such a world is aptly called Pure Evil or Waste-land. That is way, Hardy think that man may have knowledge and mastery over Nature’s wealth, but he should not misuses them. Hardy speculates that man may obtain whatever he requires from Nature if he devotes himself to her wishes. Man must understand and treat her as his fellow being, a friend and a guide and he should treat her his companion.

REFERENCES


8. Ibid.
