

Charles Dickens' literary forte as mingled with social molifs with a voice of accusing energy:A Note

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Abstract: This is an attempt to show the Victorian Age – the Age of Dickens as an age of material affluence, political consciousness, democratic and social reforms, scientific advancement and social unrest producing a galaxy of great men like Charles Dicken, Ruskin, Carlyle, Thackeray and George Eliot, of whom Dickens established himself as the notable novelist in England with exception of Henry Fielding for voicing a protest openly and vehemently against the corruption and social maladjustments of the Victorian Age. It examines in depth how Dickens contributed to the salutary weakening of dogmatic egoism expressing sentiments against the harder advocates of rationalism by proving his novel as nothing but a picture of all social evils of the times against which he fought using fiction as a weapon for fighting social evils almost as a crusader, bringing home the fact and point that Dickens is the one living link between the old Kindness and the new, between the goodwill of the past and the good works of the future.

Key Words: material affluence, social unrest, exploration, radical change,dogmatic egoism, rationalism, goodwill.

The Victorian Age, the Age of Dickens, is one of the most remarkable periods in the history of England. Dickens called it the best as well as the worst period, the spring as well as the winter season of England. It was nothing but an era of material affluence, political consciousness, democratic and social reforms, scientific advancement and social unrest, producing a galaxy of great men in all walks of life. It had its own beauty as well as ugliness. While Macaulay trumpeted the progress that the Victorians had achieved, Ruskin, Carlyle, Lytton Strachey and Trollope raised frowns of disfavor against the soul-killing materialism and social evils of the age. In brief, the age of Dickins was an era of great ups and downs, an age of great political, social, religious, economic, intellectual and literary activities. Being the time of discoveries and explorations, of reforms and movements, it was an age of radical changes in every field and that is why Charles Dickens himself called it the best of all times as well as the worst of all times.

Despite the fact that the Victorian Age was essentially an era of peace and progress, with peace and progress, there was a kind of suppressed social unrest in the hearts of the people. Pessimism and gloom swept away a large majority of the thinkers and writers of age. The Industrial Revolution, creating the privileged class of capitalists and mill-owners, rolling in wealth and riches, brought in its wake the semi-starved and ill-class section of

labourers and factory workers who were thoroughly satisfied with their miserable lot. Due to social unrest everywhere, Industrial advancement created social and economic distress among the masses. Despite reforms, the social and economic conditions of the workers did not change speedily leading to the deterioration of the quality of life in all spheres. Abundance of output, dominance of a moral or socialistic or utilitarian outlook, interest in the past, fusion of romanticism and idealism as well as of rationalism and romanticism, predominant melancholic or pessimistic note, and fusion of farce and pathos, of realism and fantasy coupled with the note of individuality were the hall-marks of Victorian literature marking the growth of the English novel which flourished by leaps and bounds in the hands of such novelists as Charles Dickens, Thackeray and George Eliot of whom Dickens is the only novelist in England with exception of Fielding to protest openly and vehemently against the corruption and social maladjustments of the age.

Such a promising novelist was on 7th Feb 1812 at Portsea, near Portsmouth to John Dickens who was a clerk in Navy Pay office. When the young Charles was barely ten years of age, the whole family had to shift to Marshal Sea Prison for debts. The mother of Dickens, with eight children (Charles being the second) had to fight the world single-handed. She started a sort of educational establishment to meet both ends. Charles Dickens had to eke out a living by working in a blacking warehouse. It was in Chatham that Dickens got his early education. He was fond of books and devoted himself to his studies sincerely. Due to the economic crisis in his family, Charles Dickens had to leave his at the age of eleven. He helped his mother in every sort of menial occupation. The release of his father brought some change in the family circumstances. His father wanted to send Charles to school again, but his mother opposed the proposal and was in favour of Charles' return to the warehouse work. This was the deepest wound made in his young soul, the one cruelty that he never forgot. At the age of twenty, he became a reporter in the press Gallery of the House of Commons and started working on the sketches of the people. His early writings contain sketches of young Gentlemen, sketches of young Couples and the Mudfog Papers, which are in the forms of essays as good samples of journalism. The publication of Pickwick Papers which appeared in a series during 1836-37, made Dickens quite popular, His fortune turned in his favour and made him rich. The Pickwick Papers took the whole of England by storm. The novels which have made him so great are David Copperfield, Bleak House, Hard Times, Little Dorrit, A Tale of Two Cities, Great Expectations, Out Mutual Friends and Martin Chuzzlewit. Truly speaking, he was so much interested in the commonness of the people and his true greatness lies in his deep humanism and in his humour. In the words of Prof. Chrew, "He was of all the Victorian novelists, the man of most comprehensive soul. He saw life as no other earlier novelist had seen it" (P 14).

Dicken's art gets mingled with the social motifs. Since he had a rough time, his mind got darkened with the nightmarily visions and experiences. He don't go for excusing the rough world with the generosity of a Christ. He developed a 'voice of accusing energy'. The reign of Queen Victoria was a great literary age. Writers had a wider following of intelligent readers than in the 18th century. As society was perceived to be faulty and as the condition was believed to be remediable, critical analysis of society helped to inspire and popularize Dickens" and his like:

“In the main, his (Dickens’) novels worked upon individuals and institutions, upon men and women and the society that bound them together, in an altogether broader way, in which detail is sucked up and dispersed, giving a sense of concrete depth to what is in fact the author’s own world of fantasy” (Wilson 64).

The first three decades of the nineteenth century brought to the fore the weaknesses of English social life. this exposure was occasioned by the fear of Jacobinism and then of Napoleon. But their terror of the French Revolution as a source of infection was ill-founded. The nobles of France were irresponsible and weak but the nobility in England governed the country in fact as well as in principle. They had as much virtue and courage as they ever possessed. It is common Knowledge that Dickens’ works are so filled with actual experiences of the world in which he lived that they could be used as the most vital documents for the study of the nineteenth century social history of England. Almost all his novels are nothing but a picture of social evils of the times against which Dickens fights using fiction as a weapon for fighting social evils almost as a crusader. The central feeling which gives life to ‘Dickens’ work is termed as ‘social’. Emile Legouis writes:

“Dickens contributed to the salutary weakening of dogmatic egoism. On the point, his teaching comes into line with that of Carlyle and Ruskin, he takes up his stand with prophets of sentiment against the harder advocates of rationalism”(P1131)

The amendments to the poor laws in 1834 filled Dickens with anger which prompted him to write about it in Oliver Twist. In the words of Trevelyan, “Dickens’ Oliver Twist was an attack on Workhouse management, to which the greater sensibility of the Victorian public responded. The working class in town and country regarded the New poor Law as an odious tyranny, as indeed it often was” (P538). The novel Oliver Twist opens with the birth of a child in a work house in rural England. The child born in such poor circumstances is orphaned immediately after birth and so the care and upbringing of the child devolves on the Parish. The fortune of the child forms the substance of the novel. The chapter describing Oliver’s growth, education and board also describes the state of the children who unfortunately happen to be under the charge of the parish:

“The elderly female who had in charge of the children was a woman of wisdom and experience; she knew what was good for children, and she had a very accurate perception of what was good for herself. So, she appropriated the greater part of the weekly stipend to her own use, and consigned the rising parochial generation to even a shorter allowance than was originally provided for them” (P5).

Dicken’s object was, no doubt, to expose the shocking condition in which young innocents were brought up. Oliver survived the ill-treatment and the accidents and grew up to be nine years old when he was taken away from the care of Mrs. Mann to whom he was farmed out to be put in the workhouse to learn the useful trade of picking oakum.

The board administering the workhouse “contracted with the waterworks to lay an unlimited supply of water, and with a corn-factor to supply periodically small quantities of oatmeal” (P 34).

Poor Oliver and his fellow inmates suffered the tortures of slow starvation and grew wild with anger. And when a poor boy in a fit of desperation confessed that he might eat the boy sleeping next to him matters came to a head and it fell to lot of Oliver to ask for more gruel. This incident started him off on his journey from the workhouse. The Board decided to turn him over as an apprentice to anyone who would take him off the hands of the authorities. It happened that the notice offering Oliver was seen by Gamfield the Chimney-Sweep who wanted an apprentice. “The gross ill-usage of little boys as sweeps, by masters who found it cheaper to drive them through the soot-soaked chimneys than to use a long brush, had been exposed to the public indignation but in vain” (Travelyan 544). The exchanged between the Board and the Chimney-Sweep speak of the lot of the poor boys apprenticed to a Chimney sweep: “Young boys have been smothered in Chimneys before now”, said another gentleman. On reading the novel *Oliver Twist* one can understand that oliver is a pauper child having been born in a work house and the name *Oliver Twist* is given to this boy of unknown parentage and he has been brought up in the cruel social conditions. In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens attacked rather vehemently the evils of Poor Law and exposed the workhouse system. This novel is considered a study in crime and villainy. So social reform is suggested in the working of poor houses and a strong case is made out for the dismissal of faint-hearted persons like Bumble. A spirited appeal is made for the better treatment of children and through publication of this novel, Dickens appeared at the first time as a moralist, idealist and social reformer.

Dicken’s morality and philosophy is based upon a single belief – the paramount value of the primary, simple, benevolent impulses of man, his natural affections for home and mother and wife and sweet – heart, his unconsidered movements of charity and gusts of gaiety, his instinctive wish to love and laugh and give and share. In each of his novels, one can see natural human kindness, pitted against the soulless cruelty of an impersonal institution, an inhuman theory, or simply individual selfishness. The iron Poor Law of *Oliver Twist*, and circumlocution office and debtors’ prison of *Little Dorrit*, the corrupt legal system of the ancient regime in *The Tale of Two Cities* and laissez-faire theory, hostile to private charity of *Hard Times*, the selfish Epicureanism of *Harold Skimpole*, the avarice of *Ralph Nickleby* and *Serooge*, the hypocrisy of *Mr. Pecksniff*- all are the evidences of his moral and reformative zeal. In each book, the characters fall into two groups: those on the side of the right, humble, kindly, generous souls controlled by no systematic principle, but by the spring of benevolence bubbling up within them and those on the side of the wrong, the hypocrites, misers, selfish. In the former category fall characters like *Gargery*, *Peggotty*, *Tom Pinch*, *Mr. Buffin*. In the latter category fall the characters such as the *Mustones*, *UriaHeep*, *Veneering*, *Fagin*. Dicken’s gospel may appear to some critics to be crude. But it is not slight or shallow. It is universal because the truth it enshrines is a universal truth.

In *Nicholas Nickleby*, published in 1839 Dickens takes the social theme which needs reform. ‘Do the boys hall’ is the cruel home for the urchins. Such institutions must be reformed and the victims should be got rid of the

tyranny of the Squeers. The novelist has vastly succeeded in showing not only the poor education of the day, but something horrible. He attacks the 'atrocious schools of his day, giving us Do the boys Hall'. The novel Martin Chuzzlewit shows the propagation of selfishness. This vice has been lashed by Charles Dickens. But selfishness exists in the novel not only as the ethical bent of the characters, but also as the state of isolation in which they live. The characters in this novel do not have any intrinsic personality. They have been drawn from without rather than from within. "The characters of Martin Chuzzlewit tend to exist, then, not through the visible expression of coherent inner life, but as fixed and innate idiosyncrasies behind" (P 10). In Great Expectation one can see the re-emergence of real Dickens. "The Portrait of Pip, the ingenious child confronted by the escaped convict, and of Joe Gargory terrified by his wife are amongst the best he ever drew" (Andre Mauris 39).

Bleak House uncovers the invisible threads that connect the most notorious decaying slums of the capital with the grand melancholy estates of the aristocracy. Institutions of one kind or the other often provide a focus for the activities of and the reactions of the characters and at the same time, can be felt as a positive presence constraining and distorting human life into a variety of unexpected shapes. Bleak House, with its divided narration, reaches out to wider extremes of society than Dickens attempted in any previous work. The extremes are held by a case in Chancery and the related governing mystery of Esther's origins. They include the aristocratic great house in Lincolnshire, seat of Sir Leicester Dedlock and the Slums of London. Tom-all-Alone's is a slum property in the case. Now

"it is a street of perishing blind houses, with their eyes stoned out; without a pane of glass, without so much as a window-frame, with the bare blank shutters tumbling from their hinges and falling asunder; the iron rails peeling away in flakes of rust; the Chimneys sinking in; the stone steps to every door turning stagnant green; the very crutches on which the ruins propped decaying" (P89).

So, the crossing sweeper who is an inhabitant of that slum is

"Dirty, ugly, disagreeable to all the senses, in body a common creature of the common streets only in soul a heathen. Homely filth begrimes him, homely parasites devour him, homely sores are in him, homely rags are on him; native ignorance, the growth of English soil and climate, sinks his immortal nature lower than the beasts that perish" (P 588).

Drunkness and excessive expenditure on drink constituted "one of the major evils of city life, one of the chief causes of crime and the ruin in families" (Trevelyan 570). Dickens was not only aware of the havoc caused by cheap drink and the resultant drunkenness but its being a barrier to the betterment of the lives of the working people. And nothing could present it better than his picture of the bricklayer's home in Bleak House and Steph Blackpool's drunken wife in Hard Times. Everything in Hard Times is restricted to the exposure of utilitarian rationalism and its dearth of feeling. It could be said that Dickens "depicts Sleary's Circus as the life-giving antithesis of Mr.

Gradgrind's schemes of education and life" (Grant 86).

All through his life, "Dickens hammered home the point that crime was the result of the terrible poverty and ignorance in Victorian Society. He worked hard on society's compassion in order to diminish the poverty and the ignorance; but with minor exceptions he did not wish to rouse, its compassion for the criminals whom he declared to be the result of these evils" (Wilson 131). To Conclude, Dickens is the one living link between the old kindness and the new, between the goodwill of the past and the good works of the future.

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