



Social Realism in Selected Writings of Charles Dickens and Mulk Raj Anand

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a comparative study of social realism in the works of Charles Dickens and Mulk Raj Anand, focusing on The Old Curiosity Shop, Oliver Twist, Untouchable, and Coolie. Both writers portray the suffering of marginalized individuals shaped by structural poverty, exploitative labour systems, and oppressive social hierarchies. Dickens critiques the Victorian Poor Law and industrial capitalism, while Anand exposes caste oppression and colonial capitalism in India. Through characters such as Nell, Oliver, Bakha, and Munoo, the novels reveal how economic structures and social hierarchies shape the lived experiences of the poor. This study argues that both authors use realism as an ethical intervention aimed at representing systemic injustice and illuminating human dignity.

KEY WORDS

Social Realism, Poverty, Economic, Dickens.

INTRODUCTION

This paper will examine Charles Dickens' and Mulkraj Anand depiction of social realism namely in his selected text; The old curiosity shop, Oliver Twist, Untouchable and coolie. It will mainly deal with homelessness, heroism and forms of employment with focus on The Poor Law and the colonial rule in India.. I will look into the problem of poverty in context of first phase of industrialization which brought radical insecurity to middle class people in Britain and during colonialism in india. . Industrial Revolution in Britain transformed social economic structure of the country to a very great extent. An economic change like shift into the emphasis from agriculture to industry was witnessed due to advent of revolution. New industries

sprang offering new goods to satisfy the demand and desire of the market. As production for profit in a free market replaced production for use and as innovation of newer methods upset the balance in established industries. The phenomenon of large scale boom and depression introduced a new element into the economic life. It threatened the life of middle class people as they fall into working class. Thus poor were unable to cope with the changing economic which pushed them to marginal side and got involved into criminality and other illegal work to survive. Poor Law offered some ray of hope but turned to be blessing in disguise for them as it made their life extremely difficult. The gap between rich and poor was visible in the Victorian society, nothing was done except enactment of The New Poor Law of 1834, leading to the establishment of work houses. The authorities took measures to enact the new law effectively, and aware of corruption in the system; therefore it mandated poor to enrol in the workhouses to avail the facility. However, it was a futile attempt because the law was state sponsored programme to put an end to poor life as Royal Commission report substantiates, "though its name, the New Poor Law's aim was not to eradicate poverty, rather to clearly demarcate the emerging middle classes from those either unwilling or unable to work, intended to produce rather negative than positive effects." There were many criticism of the law in terms of public and private charity.

The Old Curiosity Shop depicts a new form of earning through illegitimate means such as gambling. Dickens' protagonist Nell is a thirteen year old girl living with her grandfather in London to support him financially. Nell and her grandfather's poverty, sickness, unemployment, homelessness, and nomadic lifestyle are mirrored in this novel. I will examine the life of Nell to provide an idea about how the poor young people lived. Nell is not a typical homeless girl, similar to those homeless people who lived in London streets and had much more difficult lives. Nell used to have her home. In those days, she becomes homeless not because of her own wish but due to her grandfather.

When Nell finds him in trouble due to debt, she helps her grandfather to escape London, a gesture of platonic love that saves him from Quilp - the money lender. In this way, she becomes nomad running away not from her present but from her future. Nell is shown a caring, deserving, homeless girl with desires of a stable and rooted life though deprived of her childhood privileges because of her grandfather indulgence in illegal practices,

"...the child trembled with a mingled sensation of hope and fear as in some far-off figure imperfectly seen in the clear distance, her fancy traced a likeness to honest Kit. ... if she had not dreaded the effect, which the sight of him might have wrought upon her fellow traveller, she felt that to bid farewell to anybody now, and most of all to him who had been so faithful and so true, was more than she could bear. It was enough to leave dumb things behind, and objects that were insensible both to her love and sorrow."

The mental agony of Nell can be seen, following her grandfather to help him with the core of her heart. On the first day of journey when they halt to have a rest, Nell is tired but continues for her grandfather; she says,

"We must go on, indeed", said Nell, yielding to his restless wish, but the women had observed from the young wonderer's gait, that one of her little feet was blistered and sore, and being a woman and a mother too, she would not suffer her to go until she had washed the place and applied some simple remedy.

Although they were poor, they were willing to help each other. She loves her grandfather and Kit to an extent that she sacrifices her life for family values, and grandfather is the person who harvests from little Neil. "The account of Nell's last few hours recalls her dreaming of those who had helped her and saying 'God bless you!' While she may be dead, there are many similar to her who could still be helped. Nell's death was not only an occasion for awakening the moral sentiments but also functioned as essential call to help those in needs. I think this is not a single-issue battle, such as against the New Poor Law but rather comprehensive call for justice. The theme of homelessness and heroic deeds finds way in Oliver Twist though the homelessness emerged from the Government system of eradicating poverty through the New Poor Law. Oliver is an innocent child, who is trapped in a world where his only alternatives appear to be the workhouse, Fagin's thieves, a jail,

or an early grave. Oliver is a homeless, searching for livelihood that construct a radical hero who protest against the established system by asking for more food;

What! Said the master at length, in faint voice, Please sir replied Oliver, I want some more’.

As mentioned about the Poor Law in the introduction, its burning example can be seen in Oliver Twist. Poverty is a major concern in Oliver Twist. Throughout the novel, Dickens concentrate on this theme, describing slums so weak that whole rows of houses are on the point of ruin. In an early chapter, Oliver attends a pauper’s funeral with Mr. Sowerberry and sees a whole family crowded together in one miserable room. As Dickens is inspired by the realistic school of thought, he portrays realism in Oliver Twist and describes the effects of industrialisation emanating in the form of new Poor Law. Poverty, child labour, education system, orphanage, recruitments of children as criminal and other social evils of the Victorian age are captured in Oliver twist; the novel begins with the killing of innocence, Oliver attends a funeral that introduces him to death at such a tender age.

According to David Daiches, Oliver Twist is “full of nightmare symbols of loss. . .” as shown in the description of Mr. Sowerberry’s shop:

“An unfinished coffin on black tressels, which stood in the middle of the Shop, looked so gloomy and death-like. . . The shop was close and Hot, and the atmosphere seemed tainted with the smell of coffins.

The image of the coffin represents death and reminds the reader of Oliver’s circumstance that he is an orphan. Death is a symbol of loss of life, just like Oliver has lost his parents. Dickens describes the misery of life in the workhouse. Workhouses symbolize an authoritative pattern of maintaining the social order; a shift from the order ends up in severe punishment. Oliver rebels against the system by asking for more food can be seen a self assertion or claim for identity in terms of equal treatment. Oliver is thrown out of workhouse and apprenticed to an undertaker Showerbery who introduced him to death. He escapes from undertaker but his fortune ends when he comes in contact of Doger who takes him to an old Jewish Fagin, who is master of underworld and runs an intuition of criminality. Fagin forcibly drags him into the world of underworld. He is instructed and trained to be a pickpocket. He is imprisoned on the accusation of stealing handkerchief but soon discharged for being innocent. Mr Brownlow takes orphan to his house. He feels better here in contrary to dark and dirty den of thieves. His happiness soon turns into hell as he is trapped by Fagin’s keep Nancy and once again he is dragged into the world of Fagin’s. He is forced to take part in burglary by skies and his other partners. The nexus of burglars could not thwart Oliver from his self-enlightenment of not giving to conspirators’ way rather sets up his own mean of revolting against his own companions. The self enlightenment infuses courage in him and dares to mislead gang and tell truth about the burglary. However, his brave deed turns into misfortune. Oliver, on the other hand, proves to be of gentle birth. Although he has been ill-treated in all his life, he recoils, at the plan of victimizing anyone else. This in fact gentlemanliness makes Oliver Twist something of a changeling tale, not just a condemnation of social injustice. Oliver was born for better things. He struggles to survive in the savage world of the underclass before finally being rescued by his family and returned to his proper place. In the centre of corruption and degradation radical Oliver remains pure hearted. He steers away from evils and receives his award leading peaceful life in the country. His attitude shows victory over evils. This makes him respectable. Thus we find that the reactive hero does not lose his gentleness throughout the story. Though there are many moments when he shows fragments of activity. His identity becomes the greatest mystery and is identified in by the positive effort and operation of people around him, without taking his any active part in his pursuit. Mr Brownlow adopts Oliver as his son and led a retired life in a peaceful village. We are never told about his adulthood. We find that Dickens portrays his identity in positive efforts despite being a victim of social evils.

Now I will will examines the modes, functions, and idealistic details of social realism in following major novels of Mulk Raj Anand Untouchable (1935) and Coolie (1936), andThe History of Indian literature is

replete with so many examples and glory that go to prove that ,Anand, one of the prominent and founding figures of Indian English fiction. He employs realism as a political, ethical, and artistic strategy to describe the conditions of the oppressed. He situates his writings under caste hierarchy, colonial capitalism, and industrial modernity. Through the character of Bakha, Munoo, and Ananta, Anand thinks fiction as a tool of social witness that exposes the structural inequity and interrogating dominant cultural narratives about purity, labour, and technology. As the vision of Anand refelects that he was inspired by Marxist ideology. He is deeply concerned on Marxist humanism, Gandhian ethics, and European modernist narrative devices. He develops a exceptionally Indian form of realism so called radical social realism that refuses romanticism. This paper throws light on how the three novels describe not only document exploitation but also narrates an epistemology of suffering, struggle, and human dignity.

Mulk Raj Anand occupies a influential position in the background of Indian English literature for his unambiguous dedication to social realism and his sustained engagement with the marginalized. He wrote during the turbulent decades of colonial rule, industrial shift, and nationalist development. According to ,he argues that ,the novel as an ethical act, an instrument for the “revelation of truth” about systemic oppression (Anand, Apology for Heroism). Most of the earlier Indian English novelists represented only privileged or middle-class life but Anand’s imagination was deeply rooted in the lives of outcastes, peasants, coolies, artisans, factory laborers, and other marginalized groups who were considered to be underdogs according to Indian social order.

Anand’s has described social realism as a method of political intervention. Anand argues that it is not merely the realistic portrayal of poverty but the intentional presentation of historical and material structures governing everyday existence. His works are the mimesis of European socialist reflection, mainly the humanistic Marxism writers like Romain Rolland, and Gandhian ethics. The three novels under the scanner—Untouchable, Coolie, and The Big Heart provide perfect texts in which Anand describes a reliable source about realism which is grounded in human suffering, labour exploitation, and the pursuit for dignity.

Untouchable published in 1935 is the most influential and powerful literary indictment of caste discrimination in Indian English literature. The novel unfolds story of a eighteen years old sweeper boy Bhaka whose daily labour and bodily existence are controlled by notions of ritual impurity.

I think Anand has portrayed the realistic caste system by depicting a character from marginalized community. Anand’s realism exposes caste not as a conceptual notion but as a material and embodied condition. Bakha’s body becomes primarily source of oppression. Every incident imposed on Bhaka like , sweeping, cleaning latrines, receiving blows, shouting “posh, posh”—reveals how is he decorated by caste stigma. We can see that how spatial separation of colonies, the construction of the latrine, and the behaviour of governing bodies clearly demonstrates that how realism operates at the level of caste, creed and gender. My subjective ideas about psychological realism is that Bakha wants to joins British soldier but marked by shame, longing, and confusion. Bakha’s admiration for British soldiers, his desire for clean clothes, and his fantasies of dignity reflect the psychological costs of caste.

Realism can be observed at the Marketplace also that when wants to buy jalebis. He is humiliated and oppressed. Anand portrays the marketplace as a microcosm of caste capitalism where economic transactions reinforce ritual hierarchy.

The novel ends with reception of Gandhi’s about the three possible “solutions”. Gandhi’s speech creates moral appeal, Iqbal Nath Sarshar’s call for systemic reform, and the flush toilet (the machine). Anand uses realism to show the failure of simple moral plea. The flush system symbolizes influence of modern technology that can eliminate the material basis of untouchability. This final scene of the novel depicts Anand’s belief that realism must offer historical alternatives rather romantic consolation.

Untouchable has truly address caste system from historical perspective in the same way his next novel Coolie expresses Anand’s social vision that how colonial capitalism and their agent exploited labour to the

extreme level. The protagonist, Munoo, who is an orphaned child who travels from one place to another place in search of livelihood expresses the concern about poverty that how it was deeply rooted in Indian geography.

Munoo's continuous movement for bread and butter signifies enforced displacement. His tragic journey exemplifies how colonial capitalism produced displaced but powerless labour. Anand's realism maps the vast expanding geography of exploitation in British India.

If we throw light on realism in domestic context, we find that in the early chapters Munoo's worked as a domestic servant. He faces lot of atrocity like physical harassment, beatings, and verbal abuse that reveals how children were treated in colonial rule and also hierarchy structures of private life. Domestic space becomes a place of micro-authoritarianism, showing how colonial modernity reproduces older forms of feudal exploitation. Apart from this industrial realism also played an important role in depicting the realistic condition of marginalized. Anand's portrayal of the textile factory is one of the initial instances of industrial realism in Indian English fiction. The factory is portrayed not simply as a workplace but as a machine that consumes bodies for profit. With relentless noise, dust, mechanical rhythm, low wages, and hazardous conditions, the factory represents the material consequences of colonial capitalism. Munoo's lungs deteriorate a symbolic representation of how the system "breathes out" human life. Munoo's fate finally takes him to the tea plantation in the Himalayan foothills. Anand criticises that how racial hierarchy of colonial labour, white managers, Indian clerks, and coolies form a stratified pyramid of exploitation. Munoo's death from tuberculosis is both truthful and symbolic that how a body becomes the victim of global capitalism. If we consider romantic novel where death signify tragic beauty but Munoo's death is a structural death created by the capitalist. It marks the culmination of social forces, not personal misfortune. Anand uses realism to show that under colonial capitalism, the life of a coolie is expendable.

CONCLUSION

Lastly we can say that, Together, Dickens and Anand assert that social realism is a complete literary mode able to cross cultural, historical, and national boundaries. Both writers use fiction as a instrument for civilizing the subjugated and critiquing the structures that perpetuate inequality. Their works demonstrate that literature can form public conscience and contribute to struggle for justice. In this shared commitment, Dickens and Anand highlight the enduring relevance of social realism as a force for moral and social transformation.

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