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## **Critique of Capitalism through the works of Charles Dickens**

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**Abstract:** The present research is an effort to trace the threads of industrialism and connect them with capitalism through the works of Dickens. The developments of industries bring lots of changes to society, from agriculture to labour, from villages to cities. Capitalism, which is a product or part of industrialization, has been introduced and focused on during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries with the rise of the cloth industry, which accumulated capital to increase productivity. Since that time, it has been observed that industrialization has left an important imprint on the faces of labourers who are exploited by the owners and separated from their families. It has also affected the nature of families, in which children suffer because of a lack of love and affection from their parents. Charles Dickens, through his novels, tries to provide similar kinds of issues, particularly social issues related to different classes of society. Through his works, he criticises the very act of industrialization and also writes about the evils of society that are spread as a result of a capitalist/consumerist society where products are more important than human beings and moral/ethical values. Thus, the present paper tries to re-read or re-evaluate select novels of Dickens through the lens of industrialism in particular and capitalism in general.

**Key-words:** Industrialism, Capitalism, Social issues, Charles Dickens.

### **Introduction**

The foundation of different industries during the romantic era brought a paradigm shift from agricultural farmers to industrial labourers. The early reign of Queen Victoria witnessed the fast and irregular development of industry. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, an important proportion of population started working in industries and moving from villages to cities and thus the early period of industrialization was callous and unkind on society as it revolutionized the traditional lifestyle to a more capitalist one.

Charles Dickens, who witnessed the horrors, cruelty, and exploitation of workhouses as well as the operation of child labour, used satirical characters in his writings to condemn the time period. In this regard,

David Cecil indicated in his work, *Early Victorian Novelists* that Dickens' "imagination is stimulated by what he himself has experienced at the age he was most susceptible to impression" (pp. 31). Many of his novels provide a picture of London society where the mindset of people are turned more capitalist and consumerist. George Orwell in his, "*Charles Dickens*" inside *the whale and other essays* mentioned that,

In *Oliver Twist*, *Hard Times*, *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit*, Dickens attacked English institution with a ferocity that has never since been approached. Yet he managed to do it without making himself hated, and more than this, the very people he attacked have swallowed him so completely that he has become a national institution himself. (qtd. in Ozutku: 842)

Though, Dickens has narrated the dirty and dark picture of London society, he never intended to shower hatred towards capitalist, rather by juxtaposing the incident of charity and love given to Oliver in the novel, he managed to show the humanity still rests in the heart of people. Contrary to this, he narrated totally utilitarian philosophy in terms of Mr. Gradgrind who believed in facts rather than imagination and emotions which led his children to suffer in coping up with life. However, the present paper traces threads of industrial revolution which brought major changes in the life of middle class and poor people and critiques the evils of society increased during that period.

### **Major tenants of Capitalism and Industrial Revolution**

Prior to the industrialisation, most of the products were made at home using simple machinery or were produced by workers with modest hand tools and skilled craftsmanship, but with the arrival of modern technology, the rural areas rapidly become industrialized or, to the contrary, people living there had to migrate to the cities in search of better opportunities. (Mallotti: 04) With the adoption of machines in the industries replacing human labour, it set the stage for the industrial revolution. In this regard, Amiya Kumar Bagchi also argued that "Capitalism has oppressed human beings, whether they were European or non-European and understands that capitalism has been a system that has inflicted harm on most of humankind including European peasants and workers" (qtd. in Henry Heller: 241). Ozutku, Tekinkaya & Vural quoted Wren and Bedein in his article, *Reflections of Industrial Revolution on Work Life in England and Its Projections in Literature: An Analysis on Charles Dickens's Hard Times*, who said that "Capitalism, together with its



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offspring – the market and factory system – robbed people of a golden age of equality and freedom” (842). Simplifying that Ozutku and his team argued that, “the people were enslaved to the owners of capital and they became a commodity in the market place of life, capitalists exploited child and female labour and industrialization created poverty, urbanization, pollution and a host of other societal ills” (842).

Due to rise of industries, society suffered a huge transformation, big cities and small towns transformed into urban sectors. People migrated from villages to cities in larger range in search of new opportunities and good lives which resulted into rise of population in cities and Britain experienced a ‘demographic boom’ (Mallotti: 05). Education was limited only to the wealthiest people and the gap between the classes began to be noticeable even though a new social class – a middle class – began to appear. Dickens too narrated such picture in his journal article, *Sketches of London Life and Places in 1833* as, “more than one and half a million people lived in the capital. In each decade after 1841, by which time several railways were running to and from the city centre, half a million more were added in what had become an explosion of growth” (qtd. in Mallotti: 05).

With the rise of population in urban areas many problems occurred such as accommodation, sanitation, clean water, healthy food, etc. However, lack of such facilities gave a rise to slums and dirt everywhere. Even Dickens has mentioned in his speech to the Metropolitan Sanitation Association in 1851 that, “Give them water, help them to be clean” (qtd. in Brown: 161) which suggests that clean water and sanitation were main concerns of the age but were mostly neglected because of capitalist mindset where they are investing only in that products which provide them profit. There were many reasons why people were not getting clean water, such as industrial waste thrown into the river, people used to dispose corpses and unwanted babies, etc.

Along with problem of sanitation and population, poverty was also a concern of the age. Due to industrialism and capitalist approach, the rich becomes richer and poor becomes poorer. Due to poverty, young man turns to committing crime such as stealing, snatching, killing, etc. and woman becomes prostitute. However, the age witnesses the rise of criminality and death of innocence and humanity in general. The whole society becomes more rational and utilitarian than humanistic. Present paper focuses on the problems Dickens has address in his novels, *Oliver Twist* (1837-39) and *Hard Times* (1854) where he analytically highlights these issues.

### **Critique of Dickens’ Novels: *Oliver Twist* & *Hard Times***

Charles Dickens is a kind of a writer who touched the life of many and both the classes (middle and poor) of society. The events happened in his life created affluence and pathos which he used for the representation of his characters in his novels. His approach to depict real life situation was greatly influenced by his unsociable experiences as a young man. John Foster, a friend and a biographer of Dickens narrated the words of Dickens in his biographical book where he expressed his apprehension and disappointment after being exposed to child labour and loss of being educated and the trance of those dreadful events:

No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I... felt my early hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man crushed in my breast. The deep remembrance of the sense I had of being utterly neglected and hopeless; of the shame I felt in my position; of the misery it was to my young heart to believe that, day by day, what I had learned and thought, and delighted in, and raised my fancy and emulation up by, was passing away from me, never to be brought back any more; cannot be written. My whole nature was so penetrated with grief and humiliation of such considerations, that even now, famous and caressed and happy, I often forget in my dreams... and wander back to that time of my life. (qtd. in Grant: 19)

Among many works of Dickens', *Oliver Twist* and *Hard Times* narrate a series of real life events happened during industrialism. In *Oliver Twist*, problems of child labour, poverty, disposing of infants into a canal or a river, rise of crime and criminality, disease and death have been vividly portrayed while *Hard Times* incorporates the problems of labourers, utilitarian thinking, pollution, prostitution, among other aspects.

Pragmatically, in the *Hard Times*, Dickens sees that industrialization has turned man into machine as a mere object, without any emotions. His observations of industrialism reflected in the following lines:

It was a town of red brick... but as a matters stood, it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows... and where the piston of the

steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. (2023: 33)

Here, he examined that people in the industrial cities are badly affected by the air pollution which causes many diseases and death. Similarly, talking about the situation of that time, Ozutku and his team also mentioned that ““Great Smog” was an extremely dense and polluted fog affected the whole of the London area leading vast number of deaths” (843). Several studies found investigating the hospital records about this topic such as, L. M. Bell & L. D. Davis’ article on *Reassessment of the Lethal London Fog of 1952*, P. Bharadwaj, G. J. Zivin, T. J. Mullins & M. Neidell’s article on *Early-life exposure to the great smog of 1952 and the development of asthma*, and many others.

Mechanization has not only brought changes in the industries but in the lives of people too. Humans are also turn out to be like machines without any creativity, compassion, pleasure, and living a monotonous, uniformed life. In the novel, Thomas Gradgrind, Tom Gradgrind, and Louisa Gradgrind are the apt examples of utilitarian thinking and monotonous living as they were living a very mechanical life. For example, when Louisa was asked by her father about the proposal of Mr. Bounderby who is more than double of her age, for marriage, her reaction was cold and utilitarian. She accepted the proposal without considering love or any kind of emotional attachment to it “because the reply depends so materially” (2023: 111) as her father suggested.

Even, the labourers working in the factories are considered as a mere object rather than a human being as they are addressed in the novel as ‘Hands’ and these Hands are regarded as “the lower creature of the seashore, only hands and stomachs” (74). However, when Stephen Blackpool, one of the paupers went to Mr. Bounderby asking for help, he was addressed by the servants as, “one of the Hands begged leave to speak to him?” (81) Even children are numbered and addressed only with numbers as Mr. Gradgrind deliberately called Sissy as ‘Girl number twenty’ again and again. On the other hand, Mr. Bounderby also represents a clear picture of capitalist ideology, and narrow-minded selfishness. One could also see this aspect in his dialogue with Mr. Childers where he bullied him for wasting his time:

We are a kind of people who know the value of time, and you are the kind of people who don’t know the value of time.



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Mr. Childers retorted as, “If you mean that you can make more money of your time than I can of mine, I should judge from your appearance, that you are about right”. (41)

One of the prominent drawbacks of industrialism is poverty. Although industrialism brought many opportunities for work but due to mechanization, machines have replaced man and man had to work hard for longer hours to earn daily wages. This physical and mental efforts make it stressful for the families and husbands were not able to give time to their wife and children. This rise of capitalism has changed the face of traditional family life and more importance is given to money and power. In the novel, Stephen Blackpool fails to give time to his wife and she could not survive pressure and turned to alcohol and prostitute which made Stephen’s life more miserable. The laborious working condition has destroyed love and passion in families and filled it with more dejection and hatred. Even children were deserted into streets and left to starvation, sickness and exploitation which give rise to criminality, as the troop of Mr. Sikes and Fagin turns out to be criminals out of such poverty.

During this period, the condition of women was more pathetic as they turned to prostitution to survive from the extreme poverty. Nancy in *Oliver Twist* and Stephen’s wife in *Hard Times* clear the picture of such harsh reality. Matthew White also noted the situation of that period in his article, *Poverty in Georgian Britain*, where he said that, “many vulnerable young girls were forced into prostitution through their failure to secure work, or were otherwise tricked into the occupation by the promise of respectable employment” (<https://www.bl.uk/georgian-britain/articles/poverty-in-georgian-britain>, 2009). Many a time such act results into unwanted babies who are mostly thrown into canals and rivers. In *Oliver Twist*, this act of finding kinchin (child) from the canals is presented humorously by Fagin which shows the lack of humanity:

The kinchins is the young children that’s sent on errands by their mothers, with sixpences and shillings; and the lay is just to take their money away – they’ve always got it ready in their hands, – then knock ‘em into the kennel, and walk off very slow, as if there were nothing else the matter but a child fallen down and hurt itself. Ha! Ha! Ha!... and you can have a few good beats chalked out in Camden Town, and Battle

Bridge, and neighbourhoods like that, where they’re always going errands; and you can upset as many kinchins as you want, any hour in the day” (2022: 366-7).

In Elizabethan times, the workhouses were places designed to provide an environment of discipline, productiveness and to help the sick one in the time of distress (Mallotti: 13). Furthermore, over the period Parishes and workhouses were the charitable institutions who decided the fate of thousands of people, but during the Victorian period, it was the most corrupted one as it can be observed in *Oliver Twist*. At this time, many people were forced to live in workhouses as begging was prohibited and can be charged for jail. When Oliver ran away from Mr. Sowerberry, he passed through some villages where he encountered large painted boards on which it was written: “warning all persons who begged within the district, that they would be sent to jail” (2022: 62) and thus people were preferring to live in the workhouses where they were barely have clothes, and food was just enough to keep them from starvation. As Ivor Brown noted in his work, *Dickens as Social Reformer*, “in *Oliver Twist* it was alleged by Dickens that pauperism at all ages was reduced by the simple process of starvation. More death meant less cost” (12). Moreover, Dickens has evidently used imagery and language to highlight the poverty and starvation of the poor in one of the scenes of *Oliver Twist* when Oliver and Mr. Sowerberry went to collect a dead woman’s body and the husband lamented thus:

I say she starved to death. I never knew how bad she was, till the fever came upon her; and then her bones were starting through the skin. There was neither fire nor candle; she died in the dark – in the dark! She could not see her children’s faces, though we heard her gasping their names. I begged her for her in the streets: and they sent me to prison.  
(2022: 47-8)

Such pathetic and horrific picture of death and poverty makes the readers to revisit the Victorian society with the hope of avoiding such mistakes in the present capitalist society. However, Dickens never intended to horrify the situation of his time but tried to show the true picture of the society considering paupers and child labours in mind.

## Conclusion

Briefly, it is seen that Dickens through vivid imagery and language presented the reflection of Victorian society where people are gradually going away from the traditional living and becomes more modernised or mechanical. Though, capitalism brought new opportunities for commerce and economical growth and uplifting the social status of people, it turned out to be a curse for paupers who could not survive starvation,

sickness and disease which is highly depicted by Dickens in his two selected novels for the present research as well as other novels such as, *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit*, *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectation*, etc. Through his works he has satirised the capitalist society where money and power has more value than human life. Passing through the lanes of streets of London along with Dickens' description, it is very clear that how poor people were living in a miserable situation among dirt, disease, starvation and extreme poverty. Although, with the picturization of Mr. Brownlow and Ms. Rose, he has also presented a hope for the survival of humanity and turned out the tragic situation of Oliver into a happy one but one cannot avoid the darker side of the reality of the capitalist society where everything is measured with money.

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