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UTILITARIANISM IN HARD TIMES: A SOCIO-ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Hard Times is an anti-utilitarian novel abused in different aspects of utilitarianism, such as on the educational level, social level and economical level. It is the condemnation of utilitarianism, materialism and existing social order. It is a crude criticism of materialism. It is an attack on the utilitarianism of Bentham as well as of John Stuart Mill and the rest of the advocates of the laissez faire economic doctrine of Manchester school. This paper is mainly concerned with the impacts of utilitarianism on the society as well as on the economy of the then England of mid-nineteenth century. This paper explores the effects of utilitarianism on the economic level and social level of the England, during the reign of Queen Victoria. Although Dickens attacks the whole educational system, social and economic system of the Victorian England and their utilitarian philosophy, but my concern in this paper is limited to society and economy of the Victorian era.

Key Words: Utilitarianism, materialism, economics, society and Victorian era.

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Introduction

Social Utilitarianism

As John Harrison has pointed out:

The target of Dickens's criticisms, not Malthusian theories of population, nor Smith's free market economics, but the crude Utilitarianism derived from such ideas by Benthamite philosophical Radicals, which tended to dominate social, political, and economic thinking and polity at the time the novel was written. The Gradgrind/Bounderby philosophy is that the Coketown "Hands are Commodities" something to be worked so much and paid so much, to be "infallibly settled" by "laws of supply and demand", something that increased in number by a certain "rate of percentage" with accompanying percentage of crime and pauperism; in fact, "something whole-

sale, of which vast fortunes were made and rd&quo" (Harrison: 116).

Dickens had a reputation as a reformer, both in his lifetime and afterwards. He has been credited with creating the climate of opinion which facilitated the reformers in education, public health and criminal law. Dickens' focus in *Hard Times* is social and political which is another aspect of utilitarianism. *Hard Times* is the novel which is full of individual alienation, class conflict and a mere attack on English legislation regarding the Poor Act Law (1833). For Dickens the Act was an epithet of the nastiest element in the Smith/Malthus/Bentham axis of opinion. But in truth Dickens was no lover of Old Poor Law either. It is to humanity that appeals in his critique. Dickens believes that the English Victorian legislation is too much beneficial to the rich people and is reckless to the poor. The mistrust and hatred of the law in this novel which is under consideration is exposed by Charles Dickens through the character portrayal of Stephen Blackpool, when he talks to one of his employee in the factory as:

Deed we are in a muddle, Sir. Look round town... so
rich as tis...and see the numbers o` people as has been
brighten into bein heer, fur to weave, an`to card, an`to
piece ou of livin`.... Look how we live, an` wheer we live
an` what numbers, an` by what chances, and wi` what
sameness... Look how you consider of us, and write of
us, and talk of us... And how you are awlus right, and how
we are awlus, wrong... Look how this ha` grown and
growen, Sir, bigger an` bigger, broader an` broader, harder
and harder, from year to year, from generation to generation.
Who can look on it, Sir, and fairly tell a man `tis not a
muddle (*Hard Times*: 198)?

Tom the real culprit of the bank robbery case instead of Stephen Blackpool who was merely suspected was not arrested by the law towards the end of the novel, and it becomes clear that with the expansion of the population as well as its growth, it becomes more and more difficult for the government of Victorian era to prevent crimes of different kinds. James Harthouse, a shrewd observer of human nature and conduct and a parliamentary candidate in Gradgrind's party of hard fact fellows is a cad who always tries to seduce the legal wife of Mr Bounderby. He also makes the plan for Louisa to elope with him. Charles Dickens through this sexual desire ridicules the Victorian society of his time. Another thing in this novel on which Charles Dickens focus is the alienation of individual from his society is through the character portrayal of the honest working-class labourers, who cannot hide the misdeeds of their seniors or managers and in turn gets alienated from their homeland because of they are fired from their jobs and are keep in a watch every time. Another aspect in this novel is the attention regarding the social-unrest, is the in identification of the individuals to know their existence. Charles Dickens had classified the people of Coketown into the bourgeois who in turn are the factory owners, bankers and high post holders and lower class people who hardly meet their basic needs. These people are the lower rungs of the society who are poor and poor and are rather determined by the upper class and are wholly and solly dependent on them regarding their livelihood. These include the factory workers, housewives, maids, circus personal, labourers etc. In Victorian society married women could not avail the benefit of their property, anything they owned becomes the sole property of their husbands and this law remained in effect during Dickens life. Divorce was close to impossible during this period, except for higher levels of people who by their means to pursue it. Divorce was always privilege to the rich in Victorian society. The marriage of Josiah Bounderby with Louisa Gradgrind on one hand and that of Stephen Blackpool to his legal wife on the other hand. The benefit of divorce laws would only goes to Bounderby but not to Stephen Blackpool because of restraints of the law. We see in the novel that how Charles Dickens presents the conversational scene of Bounderby and Stephen Blackpool regarding the divorce law in chapter eleventh of first book of *Hard Times* in-front of the readers as:

If I do her any hurt, Sir, there's a law to punish me?
Of course there is.
If I flee from her, there's a law to punish me?
Of course there is.
If I marry t'other dear lass, there is a law to punish me?
Of course there is.
If I was to live wi1 her an` not marry her- saying such a
thing could be, which it never could or would, an` her so
good-there's a law to punish me, in every innocent child
belonging to me? Of course there is.
Now a God's name, said Stephen Blackpool, show me the
law to help me!
Hem! There's a sanctity in this relation of life, said Mr
Bounderby, and- and- it must be kept up (99).

Dickens wants to convey us that in his time there was almost a divorce law but it only supports aristocrats, and the lower rungs or poor men suffers from it and they could not give divorce to their wives. How much they are in pain in their married lives, how much they are frustrated in married lives, how much they are in dilemma, because of the constraints of the Divorce law they could not free their selves from it. The best example in this novel is Stephen Blackpool, who in other aspects is good and honest man, who bear moral scruples but still his life is in vain as he is bound to the Victorian Divorce Law. He could not get rid of his drunkard wife because he is too poor who hardly meets his basic needs and by any means he could not be estranged from his bastard wife who in each respect is abuse on him. Only death can make him free from the chains of his legal relation to his vituperous wife. Thus such a divorce law for him and others like him is a curse and in the words of Dickens is a great "muddle" and nothing else. Charles Dickens in this novel also satirises the political parties such as the trade unions, for in fact they provide another tool for institutionalizing the superiority of the rich over the poor. The trade unions represented by Slack-bridge and the bank management represented by Josiah Bounderby leaves no corner for Stephen Blackpool to be banned him from his homeland, and is being denied of his love to Rachael, falsely charged of robbery case, and ultimately his alienation from himself and from his society which leads to his disaster. Both of these managements, either it is Bounderby's management or it is Slackbridge's trade unionism leaves no stone unturned to make the disastrous way for Stephen Blackpool who in frustrated sense leads to death. Here it apt beautifully by Andrew Sanders (1996), "to questioning of social priorities and inequalities, to a distrust of institutions, particularly defunct or malfunctioning ones, and to a pressing appeal of action and earnestness" (Sanders: 404). The technique of symbolism was developed by Dickens rather gradually as nice as is seen in this novel of the scene of the black ladder from which Blackpool slides down after Rachel. The factory world is made the subject-matter of magnificent description in which heads of the elephants stand for machinery. The industrial smoke is linked with the horrors of hypocrisy and deception. The use of symbols throughout the novel by Dickens is so well that even inanimate things act according to an inner necessity. Stephen Blackpool's fall into the chasm leads him almost to death and him in the coming future a martyr to the great cause of humanity. The symbol of a star as a guiding star to Stephen Blackpool is so splendidly symbolised by Charles Dickens that it seems to the reader that even Blackpool had lead to the salvation of humanity. The usage of image in the chapter ten book one of this novel foreshadows the problematic future to Stephen Blackpool, in which situation he is and at which place he is the problem bounds him like the garment which he wears or rather we can say that he is the cause of his own problems. Even he is in family or he is in employment or he is gossiping with his co-workers he cannot escape from the problem, it remains with him like a shadow to a body. He is the looser at any cost. His drunkard wife who remains with him till her death is a curse on him. He became the suffrage of deployment when he said to his boss about his personal problem that how I could get rid of my vituperous wife. When he does not join the trade union, he became the thing of ridicule in the hands of president of the

trade union. Here Dickens also uses the imagery in the glamorous way which is too well functional. Slackbridge the leader of the factory workers who gets Stephen ostracised from the workers community, with the result that when Bounderby dismisses him, Stephen finds himself utterly helpless. Stephen's decision to quit Coke town altogether is thus partly due to the bitter antagonism of Slackbridge. The 'Slack' in the name of Slackbridge makes him unreliable and is the cause of making the 'bridge' between management and the mass. Slackbridge is the villainous figure in Dickens eyes: he orchestrates the ugly mob hysteria that ostracises and indirectly kills the innocent and morally fastidious Stephen. On the other hand, reading with our present day perspective, we can see that Dickens's union man touches some resonant chords. In particular, he is right to insist that they rally round one another and one united power. A basic tenet of the entire socialist movement has always been the need to act together, to show unity in order to exert the greatest pressure on the owners of the capital. The union man's speech is ambivalent: it is boiling and common rhetoric, its comic bombast bathetic and ripe for our scorn. On the other hand Slackbridge tells some truth about the plight of workers in the industrial north in the nineteenth century. As Raymond Williams said, these are in *Hard Times* two "incompatible ideological positions": one "that environment influences and in some sense determines character" and, second, that "some virtues and vices are original and both triumph over and in some cases can change any environment" (1983:169). Thus through the narrative process of multiplication, Dickens implies that the issue of social forces is not as simple as the rest of the novel suggests.

Economic Utilitarianism

David Lodge wrote in his study *The Rhetoric of Hard Times* as:

On every page *Hard Times* manifests its identity as a polemical work, a critique of mid-Victorian industrial society dominated by materialism, acquisitiveness and ruthlessly competitive capitalist economics. To Dickens at the time of writing *Hard Times*, these things were represented most articulately, persuasively, (and therefore dangerously) by the Utilitarians (Lodge: 86).

Utilitarian theory has many facets, but as represented in the *Hard Times*, five are most in vigour. First is the general propensity to draw conclusions based on the description of groups of people rather than to recognize personage differences-as when the hard facts men think of the workers in *Hard Times* only as hands. In conditions of human conduct, this system of thought asserted that all activities were stimulated by the want to avoid pain and seek pleasure, and hence all people acted only in self-interest. In economics, it gave as the best system "buying in the cheapest market and selling in the dearest". Utilitarian also argued for laissez-faire "let it alone" in government, based on the belief that the economic system was naturally balanced and any intervention by government to address perceived ills would result in greater harm by throwing that equilibrium off balance. Lionel Stevenson (1960) perhaps means the associations between labourers and capitalists are enormously utilitarian when he says the characters in *Hard Times* "are neatly arranged in symmetrical groups, either to represent labour v/s capital or to contrast the represented children of a practical school with the fun-loving denizens of a circus"(311-12). The economic life situation of the Coketown is totally utilitarian as it casts its ashes on its own head as well as on the head of its neighbours. It is the city of Fact! This foreshadows the appearance of a grotesque mass urban society based on rationalism, ambiguity, and dehumanization. The overriding feature of the town is its inbuilt viciousness. Its citizens lack eccentricity and are the product of a ruthless, acquisitive society as is shown by Dickens in *Hard Times* as:

It was a town of red brick or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as 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 forever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river than ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam engine worked monotonously up and down like a head of an elephant a state of melancholy madness. It contain several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, who all went in an out at the same hours with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom everyday was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next (28).

The pious persons do penance for their own sins but they convert other people also to their way of thinking. Soot and smoke overhang the entire atmosphere. The fire of the furnaces in this novel is compared to the human passions. Gradgrind as Louisa to pay heed to Bounderby's proposal. However hard the laissez-faire economist may try to reduce life in a set of facts, figures and calculations, life with its subtle longings and aspirations cannot be reduced to them. Coketown and its people are living mysteries and not facts on a sheet of paper. Bounderby may make men and machines equal to each other, he may regard man as so many horse powers to be bought in the cheapest market and their products sold in the dearest market, but the process of inner growth always continues and is never absent. Even when Tom, the boy, goes wrong, it is not on account of irrational will. Smoke cannot exist without fire, as death cannot be conceived without birth and harvest without seed. As a man sows so he must reap and garner. The two problems that are traceable in this novel are the fact that rich and the authority feel no responsibility towards the people and another is that poverty is a real epidemic in the Victorian England. The time of Dickens is the most remarkable time in the history of Victorian England because of the material affluence, political consciousness, democratic reforms, industrial and mechanical progress, scientific advancement, social unrest, educational expansion and empire building. The industrial revolution during this time transformed the agrarian economy of England into an industrial economy. Mills and factories were established at important centres and the whole of England hammed with the rattle of looms and booms of weaving machine. Industrial advancement created social unrest and economic distress among the masses. The industrial revolution while creating the privileged class of capitalists and mill-owners rolling in wealth and riches also brought in its wake the semi-starved and ill-clad class of labourers and factory workers who were thoroughly dissatisfied with their miserable lot. Condition of life held no charm for labourers and workers in the field, for they were required to dwell in slum areas with no amenities of life attending them at any stage of their miserable existence. As Andrew Sanders (2001) says, *Hard Times* is "a bitter satire on the effects of the industrial revolution in northern England" (Sanders: 407). The Victorian era, therefore witnessed vigorous social reforms and a line of crusading humanitarian reformers who sought to do away with the festering sores and seething maladies of the Victorian age and Dickens was among one of them who sees under the expansion of the Victorian society there is a severe handicap of economic unrest in which minority of the people rapidly grows economically and a majority is badly retarded. Josiah Bounderby, the manufacturer and factory owner, and the prosperous banker is only an unknown, he always says that I am a self-made man and delights in his own opinion of himself at all costs, even when the fabrication upon which it is founded comes to be shown up. He is a boastful man. He boasts of something which other people would like to hide. He boasts of his humble origin. He is proud of the fact that his parents were very poor, and that he has risen to his position of prosperity by dint of his own efforts and exertions. In the past times he was a "vagabond", "errand-boy", "labourer", "porter" (Dickens: 19). Once he speaks to Louisa and said, I hadn't a shoe to my foot. As to a stocking I didn't know such an object by forename. I passed

a day in a trench, and the hours of darkness in a hole. As he was abandoned by his mother in childhood and was brought up by his grandmother who was a heavy drunkard and a wicked woman. But at present Bounderby is financially so sound that he can bought a luxurious house in the Coketown and he could manage a number of servants for his service in his home. He can purchase anything costly and can afford any comfort for him in the Coketown for his satisfaction. As Walter Allen (1968) says, in *Hard Times* Dickens is “attacking a whole social system in all its complexity whatever it seems to him to impede or prevent the flow of impulse between man and man, the exercise of the natural kindness and trust” (188). In chapter thirteen of first book of *Hard Times*, Dickens shows us how an itch between man and man can surge as:

Quiet and peace were there. Rachael was there. Sitting by the bed. She turned her head, and the light her face shone in upon the midnight of the mind. She sat by the bed, watching and tending his wife. That is to say, he saw that someone lay there, and he knew too well it must be she; but Rachael's hand had put a curtain up, so that she was screened from his eyes. Her disgraceful garments were removed, and some of Rachael's were in the room. Everything was in its place and order as he had always kept it, the little fire was newly trimmed, and the hearth was freshly swept. It appeared to him that he saw all this in Rachael's face, and looked at nothing besides. While looking at it, it was shut out from his view by the softened tears that filled his eyes; but not before he had seen how earnestly she looked at him, and how her own eyes were filled too....

I am glad you come at last, Stephen you are very late....
I came to do what little I could, Stephen; first for that she worked with me when we were girls both, and for that you courted and her married her when I was a friend... (81-2)

It is ironical that the love between Rachael and Stephen cannot be fulfilled or rather we can say that Rachael throughout this novel which is under consideration will remain modest woman as its character depicts. Dickens shows us the typical Victorian society in which the upper class level or the capitalists as example of Josiah Bounderby who by his dint of pains and exertions has gained a too much wealth and is a prosperous manufacturer and owner of the mill, and not having the good type of education so as to comprehend the social unrest in the society, and as well is the man who lacks any type of feeling towards the lower class of society. Neither he has any type of intention about the education of masses nor does he devote his wealth for the upliftment of the poor or the lower classes of the society. Neither is there any law in the Victorian society for the upliftment of the poor nor is there any norm for the lower class of society. The Victorian society by this industrial boom becomes the capitalistic society: where rich becomes more rich and labour class or working class become the suffrage in the hands of these upper rungs of society and the results of such confusion gives birth to the poverty and moral confusion. Dickens is the master of farce, as we see in *Hard Times* of chapter six of book first entitled as, “Sleary's Horsemanship” that how Dickens with his art have mingle comedy and irony to make the upper class condescend. As Bounderby and Gradgrind have gone to circus for the complaining of Sissy about the misguidance to Tom and Louisa about the enjoyment and entertainment of circus show. Gradgrind while interacting to one of the characters of the circus show tell him that even if this show is baneful to the children's of our school then how Sissy dare to tell them about this show and then rising in them the curiosity for seeing this show. Gradgrind's way of talking to these two players of circus such as Mr Childers and Master Kidderminster in a bumptious and self-important manner, they both react sharply and Master

Kidderminster feels even more annoyed than his senior. Dickens had put nicely the sarcasm of the circus clowns and their jokes in this way in *Hard Times* as:

Nine oils, Merry legs, missy tips, garters, banners, and
ponging eh! Ejaculated Bounderby, with his laugh of laughs
`Queer sort of company, too for a man who has raised, himself
Lower yourself, then, retorted cupid oh,
Lord! if you've raised yourself so high as all that comes to,
let yourself down a bit....
Perhaps so, replied Mr Bounderby, rattling his money and
laughing. Then give it mouth in your own building,
will you, if you please? Said Childers.
Because this isn't a strong building, an too much of
your might bring it down` (37).

The problem here arises whether *Hard Times* shows the Victorian English society impervious to the ill-treated educational and economic utilitarianisms of Gradgrind and Bounderby or will it go festering ethically or whatsoever. F.R. Leavis in 1947 in *The Great Tradition* rescued the novel from nearly a hundred years of such criticism in an influential essay that asserted that "*Hard Times* was a moral-fable and the only Dickens novel possessed by a comprehensive vision"(1947:227-8), thus making its technique of character typing and its universalizing social critique its supreme strength. Though some post-Leavis critics have constantly seen the novel as the slightest flourishing of Dickens's fiction because of what is alleged as thin characters and reductive critiques, others have bowed from the debate about the inaccuracy of Dickens's representation of industrialism in Bounderby, utilitarianism in Gradgrind, union organizers in Slack bridge, working class in Stephen Blackpool to the rich patterns of theme and language and to the complication and contradiction in the novel. With the readers emotions and attention primarily focussed by the narrative structure on the allegorical thematic developments rather than engaged with characters as rounded human beings, *Hard Times* can betray the Victorian expectations of a `happy ending` for the `good` characters and let some of the `bad` characters go unpunished. The more allegorical we experience Louisa to be, the more willing we are for her not to be rewarded and to accept her lonely end-husbandless, childless, a looker-on at life-ass appropriate. Louisa, Tom, Stephen, Mrs Sparsit, Bounderby and even Gradgrind end badly or sadly. What passes for a love plot- Louisa and Harthouse-is frustrated. Only those outside the system, the circus people Sleary and Sissy are free of sadness. At the focus of reader towards the finishing of the novel on the character of Gradgrind who at the end becomes optimistic and the reader breathe a sigh of pleasure with understanding.

Conclusion

Dickens in his times was considered to be a radical social reformer. He wanted to change society not by revolution but by social reforms. Hence in his novels he attacked several social evils of the day such as in this novel, he attacked on utilitarian educational system, social system and economic system of the Victorian era. *Hard Times* is out-rightly a social protest and criticism of society by Dickens. This novel is dedicated to Thomas Carlyle and is based upon the personal observations of life in Manchester. This story is loaded with the bitter sincerity of Dickens' dislike for industrialism of his homeland. As a social novelist Dickens has touched upon the problems of marriage and love and had also criticized the structure of society as well. By focusing on the class-struggle Dickens had also shown his displeasure towards growing industrialism in England. Dickens also attacks the hypocrisy and false pride of the upper classes of the Victorian age. Thus this novel is on a whole a piece of social criticism in terms of the mild attacks on capitalism, industrialism, marriage, divorce laws, hypocrisy and false pride of the upper classes, trade unionism, utilitarianism and laissez faire.

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