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REALISM IN CHARLES DICKENS'S NOVELS: A CRITIQUE OF SELECT NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

From time immemorial, it has been acknowledged that literature has a fond relationship with the realistic portrayal of society. However, few writers of a few particular periods depict their society uniquely in their literary works. One such writer is Charles Dickens from the Victorian period, who presented his time's realism uniquely in his novels. The most important aspect of his realism is that he has not shown any biasness while portraying the picture of his contemporary society. As a result, both poor and rich, hero and villain, virtues and vices find a place in his novels. Thus, reading Dickens' novels is like reading about the society of his time. This paper will explore how Dickens' novels depict realism intensely with a special reference to the history of realism in literature.

Keywords: Realism, Victorian novels, societal criticism, class conflict, child-abusing, education system.

Realism in literature refers to accurate, detailed, and pinpoint depictions of a particular society, people, and surrounding events. The Oxford English Dictionary defines realism as "close resemblance to what is real; fidelity of representation, the rendering of precise details of the real thing or scene" ("Realism", 768). A realist writer of literature often depicts the virtues and vices, the beautiful and the ugly pictures of any particular society; he aims to point out the sordid reality of society rather than romanticize it. Thus, M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, in *A Handbook of Literary Terms*, rightly commented that: "Realistic fiction is written to give the effect that it represents life and the social world as it seems to the common reader, evoking the sense that its characters might exist, and that such things might well happen" (197). This literary movement started its distinguished journey as a revolt against classicism and romanticism in the mid-19th century in France. At that time, both the realistic writers and painters showed a strong contempt for the artificiality of classicism and the romantic idealization of the romantic writers. It should be remembered that this Realist movement was first exemplified through painting rather than through any literary works. Gustave Courbet was a pioneering figure in France as far as the depiction of realism through painting is concerned. His comment on the importance of painting in portraying the reality of society is also important in this context: He commented in 1961 that "painting is an essentially concrete art and can only consist in the representation of real and existing things" (qtd. in Morris, 46).

Critics and writers have interpreted the movement and concept of realism. Ian Watt, in his *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), opined realism that it "begins from the position that the individual can discover truth through

the senses" (121). On the other hand, the French novelist Honore de Balzac in his *The Human Comedy* (1842), found a link between scientific process and realism as he claimed that "poetic creation and scientific creation are closely related activities, manifesting the tendency of realists towards taking over scientific methods" (98). Barring asides all these opinions, the common feature among all the realist writers is the depiction of the life of middle-class people – their struggle, happiness, sadness, everything. The French writers of the mid-nineteenth century, following the path of the realist painters, started to present a realistic portrayal of the life of middle-class people through their novels. Balzac was the pioneering figure in this context whose ambitious *The Human Comedy* explored the realistic life of the French people from 1815 to 1848. Balzac's contemporary Gustave Flaubert was also contributed to the movement immensely with his two major works: *Madame Bovary* (1857) and *Sentimental Education* (1869). The first one is often considered Flaubert's masterpiece and narrates the struggle of the eponymous heroine amidst a provincial life.

Gradually realism started to spread in other countries like America, Australia, England, Germany, Italy, and writers accepted the concept gleefully. In America, the concept was inaugurated by William Dean Howells in his *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885). However, the theme of realism was popularised in the country by Mark Twain, whose *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) stands apart. Another popular novelist was Stephen Crane, who blended history and realism in his novel *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895). Other popular realistic novelists of the country are John Steinbeck, Upton Sinclair, Jack London and Henry James. Henry Handel Richardson led the journey of the realistic novel in Australia with his novels like *Maurice Guest* (1908) and *The Getting of Wisdom* (1910). Few novels of contemporary Australia focused on the realistic depiction of the life of urban people. Popular examples include William Lane's *The Working Man's Paradise* (1892), Christina Stead's *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934) and Ruth Park's *The Harp in the South* (1948). On the other hand, Patrick White's novels like *Tree of Man* (1955) and *Voss* (1957) explore realism from a psychological point of view. In the 1990s, a new kind of realism emerged in Australia, termed 'dirty realism.' The novels of this group focused on portraying the diurnal life of poor people as noticeable in the novels like Andrew McGahan's *Praise* (1992), Justin Ettler's *The River Ophelia* (1995), Brendon Cowell's *How It Feels* (2010) etc. In theatre, realism was started by Henrik Ibsen in the late middle of the 19th century, and his *A Doll's House* (1879) is often considered the masterpiece of this field.

To comprehend realism fully, we must first understand the various types of realism presented in literary works. A special type of realism is magic realism which blends realism and fantasy to create an unfamiliar literary atmosphere. Although apparently, the novel's atmosphere appears to be strange, it is considered normal in the context of any particular novel of this genre. Gabriel Garcia Marquez's 1967 novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) exemplify magic realism. Another important subgenre of realism is social realism which naturally depicts the hard life of lower working-class people in society, as exemplified in Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* (1862). Many realist writers of the 1950s and 60s used to depict the life of angry young men of the post Second World War in a typical dorm of realism, termed Kitchen sink realism. The protagonists of such works are generally obsessed with criticizing society and drinking in pubs. John Osborne's 1956 play *Look Back in Anger* and John Braine's novel *Room at the Top* (1957) are a panorama of this subgenre of realism. Naturalism, an extreme form of realism, was theorized by Emile Zola, which associates realism with science. In his short story *A Rose for Emily* (1930), William Faulkner exploited such realism intensely.

Realism in novels in England began with, as Ian Watt observed in his *The Rise of the Novel*, the 18th-century novelists like Samuel Richardson, Daniel Defoe and Henry Fielding. These early novelists blended individualism and realism as a prominent scholar like Meenakshi Mukherjee observed, "The evolution of the novel in England had been closely connected with the emergence of the ideal of individualism in life and the perfection of realism as a mode in fiction" (68). M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, in their book *A Handbook of Literary Terms*, observed that although Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders* present 'extraordinary adventures' and 'extraordinary misadventures' of their protagonists, respectively, still they are considered realistic novels "in the ways that make them seem to their readers the very stuff of ordinary experience" (259). In the late 19th century, George Eliot, whose real name was Mary Ann Evans, wrote a few realistic novels of par excellence. In chapter XVII of his 1859 novel, *Adam Bede* declared that she aimed to "give

a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves” (156). Her other realistic novel, which got worldwide recognition, is *Middlemarch: a Study of Provincial Life*, published in 1871-72.

Charles Dickens was a prolific novelist who did “mirror the intellectual patterns of the Victorian age, in which he became the dominant literary figure” (Carter & John 251). Almost all of his novels present some societal pictures of his time; although the tone was satirical, the intention was to reform the social vices of his time. It is noticeable that Dickens started his career with some comic portrayals in the style of Tobias Smollett, as noticeable in his *Sketches by Boz* (1836). However, a serious and satirical tone soon followed as the primary focus was on the “examinations of society, the law, industrialism, trade unions, and historical ideals” (Carter & John 253). After his father's imprisonment, Dickens himself had to work in a boot-blackening factory, and he realized how children of his time could be easily exploited. Thus this mistreatment of children was a prevalent theme in his novels like *Oliver Twist*, *Great Expectation* and *Nicholas Nickleby*. In *Oliver Twist*, he portrayed the ill effect of the Poor Law Act of 1833, which made numerous children vulnerable at the hands of some crude people. His *Our Mutual Friend* and *Martin Chuzzlewit* exploit the hypocrisy and corruption of his society in the most realistic way. On the other hand, his two other major novels, *Hard Times* and *Little Dorrit*, criticize his time's education and prison system, respectively.

Dickens was a master at portraying children's characters, and no novelist can match him in this. While depicting the life of children in his novels, especially their psychological aspects, Dickens himself becomes a child. Thus Compton-Rickett rightly described the novelist as “capital at a baby” (197). The famous novelist George Orwell commented about Dickens that “no novelist has shown the same power of entering into the child's point of view as Dickens” (qtd. in Compton-Rickett 200). However, it is noticeable that all successful child characters like Pip, Oliver Twist, David, or Little Nell were victims of either child labour or mistreatment. This theme of mistreatment of children has been effectively depicted through the life of David in his *David Copperfield*, which the novelist himself liked “the best” (Preface). When David's mother married for the second time to Mr Murdstone in the novel, a dark cloud covered the young boy's life. Both Mr Murdstone and his sister Miss Murdstone started to live in David's house and treated the young boy cruelly and horribly. When David was sent to a school (Salem House), he was also treated brutally by the teacher Mr Creakle. The growing industry during Dickens' time demanded many labours, and children often became a victim of that. After the death of his mother, Mr Murdstone sent David to a factory in London where he used to wash empty bottles and put labels on them. Thus, the happiness and innocence of childhood withered away with the arrival of hard reality.

Most of the children in Dickens' novels are either orphans or are abandoned by their parents. This is true in the case of Oliver (in *Oliver Twist*), David (in *David Copperfield*), Pip (in *Great Expectation*) or Barnaby Rudge (in *Barnaby Rudge*). Dickens has often criticized the slum areas of his time in his novels as those areas were the origin of all the crimes and criminals. Criminals like Fagin from *Oliver Twist* were everywhere, and their main target was to entrap innocent child-like Oliver who would work for them. The more Oliver tried to escape from this criminal world, the more he was entrapped. However, as mentioned earlier, Dickens' main motive was to reform society and people. Thus, at the end of the novel, we find poetic justice with the death of Nancy and Fagin and Oliver is also rescued from the trap. Whether it is Oliver, David or Pip, they all missed the affection and love of their parents in their early stages. In *Oliver Twist*, Oliver is seen trying hard to get such love and affection from every character, even from criminals like Fagin or Nancy. Pathos is an integral part of Dickens' novels, especially when he explores the mistreatment of children. In *Oliver Twist*, the scene in which little Oliver asks for some more food from the master of the workhouse is a perfect example of this. Perhaps, the most poignant example of such a scene where pathos and sentiment go hand in hand is Little Nell's death in his *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

Another aspect on which Dickens focused a lot in his novels was the poor education system of his time. In his novels like *David Copperfield*, *Hard Times* and *Great Expectations*, he brutally criticized the unsystematic education system of his times. In *David Copperfield*, David's early education began under the guidance of Mr Murdstone, one of the cruellest persons in the novel. The education and teaching process requires love, tenderness and also mutual understanding. Every time David forgot any lesson, Mr Murdstone used to beat him brutally. This, in turn, created a sense of fear in David, leading to his forgetting the lesson constantly. While going

through Mr Murdstone's teaching process, one would assume that he focused more on beating David rather than teaching him anything. When David bit Mr Murdstone one day, the former was sent to Salem House, a notorious school of that time. Mr Creakle of Salem House was equally cruel as Mr Murdstone, who treated students based on their family's financial condition. While students from the higher class got his favour, students like David were beaten mercilessly. Even he did not hesitate to dismiss a teacher like Mr Mell as he belonged to a low-income family.

The climax of Dickens' criticism of the education system occurs in his *Hard Times*. A proper education implies reasonable thinking or facts and exercising one's imagination. However, Mr Gradgrind, a prominent teacher in the novel, insists on Facts only, which he believes is the key concept of education. As he comments: "Now, what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else" (236). Thus, it can be perceived that a kind of restriction and boundary is imposed upon the students, preventing their free-thinking. Even the government inspector emphasized Facts, instructing the students to "discard the word fancy altogether" (240). Dickens pointed out these faults of education and their effect on the students. Thus, Mr Gradgrind's son (Tom) and daughter (Louisa) could not cope with this system and could not become ideal people in future also. Louisa was forced wrongly to marry a person much elder than her as her father believed age did not matter in a marriage. Eventually, Louisa shunned this bond and fled with her lover of the same age. Even Tom could not succeed in life and was ultimately involved in gambling and robbery.

Much of the pathos in Dickens' novels arise from exploiting the characters; many of them are children, of course. In *David Copperfield*, David was exploited by Mr and Mrs Murdstone in his own house. Even once, he was locked in a room for five days which mentally disturbed him. The fact is that Dickens himself had to go through such exploitation in his childhood; this is why he had portrayed such a traumatic experience so realistically. Like David, Dickens also worked in a blacking factory for six months, which was the hardest time. This period affected him mentally and psychologically, as can be observed from his confession to John Forster: "No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into this companionship. My whole nature was so penetrated with the grief and humiliation of such considerations that even now... I wander desolately back to that time of my life." With the industry's growth in Dickens' time, there arose the bourgeois and merchant class, whose sole aim was to exploit the labourers associated with it. In *Hard Times*, the novelist has portrayed an ugly picture of such exploitation where labourers are treated like a machine. They had to work almost twelve hours a day with very little rest to manage their daily food. Their daily routine is monotonous, and Dickens' portrayal of them is sometimes disturbing as they were not considered human beings, rather as "hundred horse steam power."

As a realistic novelist, Dickens did not forget to explore another prevalent issue of his time – class conflict. With the growing industry and economic stability during Dickens' time, a marked conflict and contrast were noticeable between the bourgeois and the society's labour class. Money was at the centre of such conflict, and with the help of this money, people from the bourgeois tried to control people from other classes. Dickens' *Great Expectation* portrays such conflict and focuses on how money can change people altogether. The noun 'Expectation' in the title signifies the expectation or anticipation of some wealth or money. Through the character of Pip and Magwitch, the novelist points out that money acts differently upon different people. When Magwitch earned much money in Australia through his hard work, he gave all of his earnings to Pip so that Pip could become a gentleman. On the other hand, after receiving the amount, Pip became snobbish and forgot his faithful companions like Biddy and Joe, who were beside him during his tough times.

In *Great Expectation*, Dickens repeatedly focused on how possessing money became a key factor in winning the love of someone. With the aid of money, people even tried to uplift their social position and earn respect. When Pip fell in love with Estella, he understood that he had to be in the same position as that Miss Havisham to win the hand of Estella. In *David Copperfield*, characters like Steerforth, Mrs Steerforth, and Rosa Dartle belong to society's so called upper class. All these characters can be termed immoral, arrogant, and cruel as their main motive is exploiting the poor. A character like Steerforth knows very well how to use a woman like Emily, belonging to the lower class. He first made a false marriage promise to Emily, and after using her to the

fullest, he deserted her. He received full support from his mother and Rosa Dartle, and Emily's complaint had always been ignored. Even in his *Hard Times*, the novelist different yet unique lifestyle of people from various classes through the characters like Harthouse, Bounderby and Stephen Blackpool.

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