

STARTLING PARALLELS IN SOCIETY: RE- READING-OLIVER TWIST BY CHARLES DICKENS

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Abstract: Literature written centuries ago is of utmost relevance today. The issues raised in the literature written years ago are still prevalent in the society. Charles wrote *Oliver Twist* in 1838 to highlight the hypocrisy of people towards the poor, but today even after the developing nations have earned the tag of developed still our attitude towards the poor is same. Successive governments and society in large have been very indifferent towards the homeless orphans. Thus the proposed research paper intends to justify the importance of *Oliver Twist* in the 21st century.

Keywords: Capitalism, London of 1838, Postmodern Era, Social Issues, Workhouses.

Introduction: "Literature is one of the most interesting and significant expressions of humanity".

--P.T. Barnum

All literature, be it in any form like, novel, story, epic essay poem etc. represents life in all forms and conditions. Literature is being produced since the origin of human species. Though recorded or not recorded, literature has been there since ages. Reading and exploring that literature written in previous years gives us many unlimited benefits. Reading *Oliver Twist* to a class of B.A. II, the students made me realize that the novel is not only talking of issues prevalent in the London of 1834 but addressing the issues of our present era too. Not only *Oliver Twist*, I think other works by Charles Dickens too like *The Pickwick Papers*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *David Copperfield* are not only universal and emotional while a mirror on the issues of postmodern times as well. He has created characters with whom readers can identify themselves even after 200 years. He has cultivated empathy and defamiliarized reality. His novels have been reflection on society and set a platform to impact and ignite a social change. *Oliver Twist* was written basically to expose the inhuman conditions of the orphan homes. It was in a way his reaction and response to the new amendment in law. *Oliver Twist* was written basically to expose the inhuman condition of the workhouses after the new amendment in law for the poor, which separated poor children from their families. The novel is full of disturbing scenes and stories about poor and deprived children who got separated from their parents. These traumatized experiences of the children in the workhouses and as well on the streets of London send a potential message to the governments of the coming eras to be considerate towards the plight of such children.

The story of *Oliver Twist* has surprising parallels with the condition of Orphans in the present era. Infact, I believe Charles Dickens wrote the novel *Oliver Twist* to point out the hypocrisy of new and brutal laws. He was upset with the Government's indifferent attitude towards the institution of family. I have been teaching *Oliver Twist* since the last almost 15 years, but the recent exploitation of children in the Orphan houses has reminded me of *Oliver Twist* written in 1838. Moreover the children are exploited not only emotionally but abused sexually also. *Oliver Twist* was a thoughtful intervention published in monthly installment as a reaction to the (un-Christian) Poor laws. All of us know about the poor laws after reading the book. But the question arises – what were the poor laws?

The 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act was passed by Parliament. Popularly known as the New Poor Law, replaced the earlier legislation of 1601. The theoretic basis for the major law change was that population increased faster than resources unless unchecked. Infact this was done to decrease the grants to poor people who tend to claim relief rather than working. So a new system was brought in focus which declared that relief would only be given to workhouses not to individuals. The Amendment was done on the recommendations of the Royal Commission into operation of the Poor Laws. The commission

had taken two basic principles into account. The commission recommended strict eligibility conditions for the people living in the work houses. The survival and working conditions were made from worse to worst. Secondly, the relief to poor was stopped. For claiming aid and the relief one had to be inmate of workhouses only. Though the recommendations were given keeping in mind the economy of the country but very little consideration was given to the practicality of implementation. The amendments meant that if too much relief was provided to the poor, the physically fit and capable poor will also not like to work. They would like to avail the grants and sit idle. The new poor law was passed because majority of the people wanted that lazy and shirkers should be taken out of the beneficiaries lists. The tax paying people felt that their hard earned money is being wasted upon on these lazy shirkers who do not want to work but just to avail the free food facilities. To implement these conditions recommendations were given in the parliament that the conditions in workhouses should be made such that only the helpless and desperate people come to live there. Thus abject and humiliating terms and conditions were imposed. As a result of this families were separated women were separated from their husbands and sent to far away workhouses children were starved but made to do hard physical labor. The novel, *Oliver Twist* brings out in front of the readers the everyday cruelty meted out to children in the so called workhouses.

Oliver Twist was one of the first novels written by Charles Dickens in the year 1838, which is relevant even today. Charles Dickens wrote this novel as a series. He saw the plight of orphans, the divisions in society and felt hurt at the callous attitude of the privileged towards the less privileged. The hardships of the workhouse where he was an inmate forced him to utter words, "Please, Sir, I want some more".

These six words uttered by Oliver changed his destiny forever. Beaten up, abandoned, Oliver ended up in the streets of London. The opening incidents in the novel work as catalysts for the story. We are introduced to further alarming situations in the story. Upon reaching London, Oliver is picked by Fagin and introduced to the world of crime. As if it was not less, he is accused of stealing from Mr. Brownlow. Escaping the cruel judicial system he finds a benefactor in Mr. Brownlow. As he was about to settle down, Nancy Bill Sikes kidnap him and pull him into the world of crime again. Thus the story continuously takes us to climax, anticlimax, action in rising and falling against. Co-incidence is another factor which plays pivotal role in the story. Dickens has presented not only the incidents exactly which happened there in London but which could happen in real life in future in any country. Dickens has always believed in humanitarianism. Like a true humanitarian he believed that there is a scope to improve the innocent children who have been trapped in the nexus of crime. Dickens wrote the novel at a very young age. He was totally against the new legislation. G.K. Chesterton has very finely written about Dickens:

"Dickens attacks the modern workhouse with a sort of inspired simplicity as of a boy in a fairy tale who had wandered about sword in hand, looking for ogres and who had found an indisputable ogre. All the other people of his time were attacking things because they are bad economics or because they are bad politics or because they are bad science, he alone is attacking things because they are bad."

Oliver Twist has exposed injustice in the London of 1830s. Dickens has given us a glimpse of deprived and underprivileged section of society. He has connected us to the feelings of orphans living in the workhouses at the mercy of Govt. grants. By making us familiarize with issues and situations in the lives of the poor, he has allowed us to think and raise, a question to the law maker's indifferent attitude, towards them. Not only in *Oliver Twist*, but in other writings also he has exposed this hypocrisy. The same hypocrisy is to be seen in the orphan houses of 2018 also. It is important to understand the psychological trauma of a child when he lives separately from children. On the outside, it seems that orphanages are safe heavens for children, but in fact they are the safe dens of cruelty sexual, psychological abuse. Violence is very common in these orphan houses. These orphan houses enjoy the charity and kindness of kind hearted people and as well governments also. Moreover, the infrastructure at these places is so poor that living in these conditions is worse than hell sometimes. The people who manage these orphanages enjoy the tax freedom in the name of giving infrastructure to the children. Children are kept unaware about their rights. The administrators appointed at these orphanages carry out exploitation. In India we have countless incidents where the wardens, watchmen, cooks and other

staff appointed at these orphan houses is themselves involved in abusing the children. In India the female children outnumber the male in the orphan houses because of people's preferences for the male child. Another issue which India is facing is that many children who are living in the orphan houses are not infact orphans. There are the children who have been left in the care of orphanage because their parents cannot afford their living expenses. In 1830 London also faced same problem when people wanted that the grants to these workhouses should be cut so that only the helpless orphans or genuine poor come to live. Then Charles Dickens wrote *Oliver Twist* to make the state as well as people aware that we need to promote family, kinship and alternate care.

Basically *Oliver Twist* is also a story about the social inequality, thieves and law. The whole story is carried forward through a dramatic action plan of climax and anti-climax. Charles Dickens has pitched good vs. bad characters in the story and adopted a tradition method of all's well that ends well. The rampant scenes of poverty which Dickens describes in the novel remind us of the social injustice happening around us. Right from the beginning of the novel we are shown half starved inmates of the orphans house and helplessness is writ large on their faces. Due to the unhygienic conditions in the workhouses many children prefer to stay outside and sleep in the open. The way to Fagin's den is full of strive, filth and squalid reminds us of the slums aground our cities. With no proper food, water and shelter home to stay, the Fagin and his friends quickly remind us of Dharavi (Mumbai). It is estimated that India has around 62 million people living in slums. Whereas we might boast of travelling and entering the planet of Mars or booming economies but the bitter truth reality of the day is that the slums have become indispensable to our country. Every city in India is surrounded by slums giving rise to crime, hunger in the same way as Charles Dickens has depicted in *Oliver Twist*.

Not only in London, in 1830s, the rehabilitation of these children was an uphill task for the Government but even today despite the establishment of orphan houses and other welfare schemes, much more needs to be done. Charles Dickens had written this novel to register his protest against the callous attitude of the governments and society towards the orphans. Dickens was not only a radical writer but a revolutionary and a social reformer too.

In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens, has depicted a society divided on the lives of class and status the industrial revolution, which took place during the 18th and nineteenth century effected the economies of developed countries. Prior to the Industrial revolution the manufacturing was often done in houses on small scale and it gave people employment but after the mechanization and industrialization, people also lost their jobs which resulted in loss of wages and as a result in increase in poverty levels.

The same scenario reminds us of the entry of ICT into our lives. The industrial revolution took the physical labor away. It converted the worker into a machine operator whereas the digital revolution has done away with mental labor. It has produced robots who do the thinking for us. Technology has invaded our lives so much that existence of humans has become a key question. Unemployment has been the common outcome of these two processes. *Oliver Twist* is not only a work of art rather it is an account of social and economic problems faced by the people after the industrial revolution. Along with this Charles Dickens has put in front of us the three major problems faced by the country i.e. child labor, indifferent attitude of the government towards charity houses and the class divisions in society. Today, we Indians are too being haunted by these issues even in the 21st century.

Children are always considered the future of a country. The future of any society and country depends upon its children. The state of affair in our country is very alarming. If we are to believe the national census of 2011, there are 4.35 million child laborers in the age group of 5 – 14 years. It is not a unique problem only of India but a worldwide problem. Most importantly we have a Constitution where we have prohibition on child labor. Not only this we have various other laws like Juvenile Justice of Children Act – 2000 which provides care and protection to such children. And then we have Child Labor Act 1986 which includes prohibitions and abolition and even allows the prosecution of employer also. Alongwith this we have many NGO also who have Bachpan Bachao Andolan, Care India, Child Rights and You, Ride India, Child Line etc. In spite of all these schemes and laws, India accounts for the second highest number where child laborer is still there.

The workhouses in *Oliver Twist* describe a very grim picture of life. Oliver born as an orphan in a workhouse spends first nine years in badly run home. Thereafter, they are made to work more and eat less. The workhouses were getting money from the governments. If Oliver Twist asked for more food he was beaten and then kept in dark room without food for one week.

A study conducted by International Children's Charity has found that India has around 20 million orphans which comes out to be gap of total population of India. More striking and surprising fact is that only 0.3% of these orphans are those whose parents have actually died rest have been abandoned by parents. Infact the orphan as defined in the dictionary means.

Moreover we don't have one uniform definition of an orphan in this era. Whereas according to the terminology used by UNICEF (United Nations Children Fund) the children who lost one parent are also considered as orphans. But the governments of different countries have coined different definitions to cut out the grants to these shelter homes. No government has been serious enough to help these helpless and destitute children.

Thus the major concerns raised in the novel are the burning issues of our present times also. Hunger, poverty, homelessness and juvenile crime are prevalent all over the globe but approach to handle out these issues is still the same as depicted in *Oliver Twist*. The governments and the society is totally indifferent towards handling these issues. Thus, the novel written two centuries ago is still relevant today. Not only it mirrored the reality of London of 1830 but warned us about the future problems also.

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