

The Conditions of England as Reflected by Dickens' Social Novel

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ABSTRACT:

Conditions of England and the serious attempts of Social reform in England during the nineteenth were the common concern of many writers in the hope of bringing about change in the society. Indeed, the consequences of the Industrial Revolution and the awareness, particularly on the part of the reading public, paved the way for both nineteenth century and twentieth century welfare reforms.

This paper attempts to focus on the fictional representations of the Conditions of England, and underline Charles Dickens' contribution to the changes and reforms that took place during that era. Nineteenth century England was the high noon of the social realist novels. The leading Victorian writers like Dickens, George Eliot, Benjamin Disraeli and Elizabeth Gaskell attempted to represent and diagnose the social problems of England in their works. Hence, the term social reform has come into use to refer to the social movements. Those movements took the form of group actions; which were large, sometimes informal, groupings of individuals or organizations that focused on specific political or social issues. The novels that dealt with these issues came to represent a body of narrative fiction that adopted different means to bring about the demanded changes. One important means was the novel, which was also known as the industrial or social problem novel. This type of novel is "a work of fiction in which a prevailing social problem, such as gender, race, or class prejudice, is dramatized through its effect on the characters of a novel". More specific examples of social problems that are addressed in such works include poverty, conditions in factories and mines, the plight of child labour, violence against women, rising criminality, epidemics and poor sanitation in cities.

Key words: Contribution, social problems, Social reform, Conditions of England.

المستخلص:

كانت الأحوال و المحاولات الجادة للإصلاح في إنجلترا خلال القرن التاسع عشر محط اهتمام الكتاب من أجل إحداث التغيير. و في واقع الأمر كانت آثار الثورة الصناعية و ادراك جمهور القراء خاصة للأوضاع الراهنة قد مهد الطريق للإصلاحات المتصلة بالرأفاهية في القرن العشرين. تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية الي التركيز علي الصور الروائية للأحوال في إنجلترا و ايضاح مساهمة شارلس دكنز في التغييرات و الاصلاحات التي حدثت خلال تلك الفترة. يمثل القرن التاسع عشر في إنجلترا الذروة بالنسبة لإنتشار الروايات الاجتماعية الواقعية. و قد هدف الكتاب الفيكتوريون الرواد في أعمالهم امثال، دكنز، جورج اليوت و بنجامين دزرائلي و اليزابيث جاسكل الي تصوير و تحليل المشاكل الأجماعية في إنجلترا. و كذا ظهر مصطلح الاصلاح الاجتماعي للإشارة الي الحركات الاجتماعية.

و قد كانت هذه الحركات الإجتماعية في شكل مجموعات ناشطة كبيرة و كانت هذه المجموعات ذات طبيعة غير رسمية احيانا، تتألف من الأفراد و المنظمات الي كانت تتركز علي قضايا سياسية و أجتماعية محددة. كانت الروايات التي تناول هذه القضايا تمثل نوعاً من الروايات القصصية التي استخدمت وسائل مختلفة لإحداث التغييرات المطلوبة. و كانت احدي هذه الوسائل الرواية التي اصبحت تُعرف بالرواية الصناعية او رواية المشكلة الاجتماعية. و هذا النوع من الرواية فهو عمل قصصي يتم فيه تناول المشاكل الاجتماعية بطريقة مسرحية ، مثل الجنس، العرق او النظرة الطبقيه من خلال تأثيرها علي الشخصيات الروائية. و هنالك أمثلة اكثر تحديداً للمشاكل الاجتماعية التي يتم تناولها في مثل هذه الاعمال، تشمل الفقر، الاوضاع في المصانع و المناجم ، معاناة العمال الأطفال و العنف ضد المرأة و الجريمة المتصاعدة و الأوبئة و الصرف الصحي المتدنّي في المدن.

الكلمات المفتاحية :- مشاركة، المشاكل الإجتماعية ، الاصلاح الاجتماعي، الأوضاع في إنجلترا.

INTRODUCTION :

Dickens was an outspoken write about poverty and social stratification of Victorian society. In a New York address, he expressed his belief that, "Virtue shows quite as well in rags and patches she dose in purple and fine linen". He effectively employed fiction to criticize economic, social and moral abuses in the Victorian era. He showed compassion and empathy towards the vulnerable and disadvantaged segments of the English society, and contributed to several important social reforms. His awareness of the social ills of his time are derived from his traumatic childhood experiences .He believed in the political and ethical potential of literature, and used his fiction as a springboard for debates about moral and social reform. In his novels of social analysis, Dickens became an outspoken critic of unjust economic and social conditions. His deeply felt social commentaries helped to raise the collective awareness of the reading public. Indirectly, he contributed to a series of legal reforms, including the

abolition of the inhumane imprisonment for debits, purification of the Magistrates' Courts, a better management of criminal prisons, and the restriction of the capital punishment. Dickens's novels belong to the humanitarian movement of the Victorian era. He was from first to last a novelist with a purpose, and was always ready to attack some specific the abuse in the existing system. Throughout he showed himself as the champion of the weak, the outcast, and the oppressed. In nearly all his novels the launched attacks upon some legal or social evil. He satirized boarding schools in "Nicholas Nickelby", the court Chancery in "Bleak House", the new manufacturing system in "Hard Times", the workhouse in "Oliver Twist", and the pettifogging lawyers in "Great Expectations".

If you were living in early nineteenth century England, you would probably be curios to get answer to some urgent questions: How is it to live in a time of poverty? How would life be if you were

poor and did not know from where you would be getting your next meal? What would it be like to be forced to live in a workhouse? Dickens, who was a lifelong champion of the poor, addresses these crucial issues in his early novel and timeless masterpiece *Oliver Twist* (1838). He himself suffered the harsh abuse of the poor by the English legal system. In the 1830s, the poor in England had no voice. Their children were often mistreated and subjected to the poorest of working and living conditions. Indeed, the Victorian Era was characterized by the use of children to help develop the economy. Child labourers received less than the essentials needed at home, school, and at work. In a nutshell, the life of a young worker was in essence the life of a slave. Dickens' attacks on the defects of existing institutions in his novel *Oliver Twits* will be explained and analyzed. It will be shown how he manages to create a world in which he mirrored the truths of the real world. Hence the need a closer looks at the historical background. Like many writers, Dickens drew from his own life's experiences as a means to produce many stories. These stories showed how evil society was, and how industries forced children into labour, and the injustice done by the courts to the poor and weak. Dickens grew up as a poor child who had to take up labour at a small age. He was ill-treated because of his poverty, and in a way different from other children who were from wealthy families, Hence his deep sense of injustice and inequality, and the belief that everyone should be treated the same. He had firsthand experience of the bad working conditions at his time.

Naturally enough, he was led to write many novels about the suffering of poor children. Dickens' attacks on society were based on traditional moral beliefs and humanism, rather than on social or political theories and programmes. He called for a secular ideal of human brotherhood. Fraser's Magazine, in its obituary of Dickens, noted this aspect of his beliefs: "He spent no thought on religious doctrines or religious reforms, but regarded the Sermon on the Mount as good teaching, had a regard for the village church and churchyard, and quarrelled with nothing but intolerance." About Dickens's belief in domestic life as the source of happiness and the alternative to social evil, Angus Wilson, argues "Even more vital to Dickens was the idea of pure love as the means of redemption of flawed, weak, or sinful men. Neither of these beliefs can properly take the weight that he imposed on them..." Dickens contemporaries saw him as a member of and the spokesman for a particular class. A reviewer for Blackwood's in 1855 noted that Dickens' represents a class that he owes his speedy elevation to the top of the wave of popular favour, than any other author of his time, a class, and writer, the historian and representative of one circle in the many ranks in our social scale. Despite their descents into the lowest class, and their occasional flights into the less familiar ground of fashion, it is the air and breathes of middle-class respectability which fills the novels of Mr. Dickens. The Social Reform system in the Victoria age was a mechanism that sought to emulate the wave of initiatives that aimed at curing the social ills during the latter part of that era. Historically,

such reforms were often rejoined to halt the general practices that had been taking place for many years in short bursts; hence reform was often accomplished by private citizens and businesses, with little or no government intervention. These reforms were also extremely diverse, ranging from the commonly cited safety or health codes of the early 20th century, to the ill-fated and universally banned movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The historical facts about social reform are quite messy. For the sake of simplicity, it can be said that the Victorian system displayed only the most common reforms and ignored the private sector reforms, favouring the more easily managed state reforms. These reforms can be seen as helpful, or harmful, for overall, it depends on one's personal attitude, regardless of public opinion which was mainly concerned about the cost and benefit of kinds of reform that might be brought about. Dickens was not only a novelist to draw the attention of the reading public to the deprivation of the lower classes in England. Indeed, he was much more successful than his predecessors in exposing the ills of the industrial society, including class division, poverty, bad sanitation, privilege and meritocracy and the experience of the metropolis. He became universally associated with social issues. In his fiction, most characters have a job, but he rarely shows them at work. His novels are mostly concerned with social relationships; especially his later novels which contain some of his most trenchant pieces of social commentary. Beginning with his second novel, *Oliver*

Tist, through *Nickolas Nickleby*, *A Christmas Carol*, *The Chimes*, *Dombey and Son*, *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, and ending with *Little Dorit*, Dickens expresses his complete rejection of the claims of classical economics, and shows his moral concern for the social well-being of the nation. His early novels expose isolated abuses and shortcomings of individual people, whereas his later novels contain a bitter diagnosis of the condition of England. The real significance of Dickens. Social endeavours go far beyond the eloquent phrasing, plot devices and characterizations and sensitive handling of the joys, lows, woes and worries of the human condition. It is contingent on the readers immersing themselves in a perfectly observed and created world, a world full of conflicts and contradictions, inspiration and intrigue, love and loss, and justice and truth. Under the new system, the cost of poor relief was reduced by more than one-third. Within three years. This system was sharply criticized and censured: *Oliver Twist* provides a truthful account of the state of affairs and it is obviously clear that Dickens keen to expose the work houses conditions and call for their improvement. It can rightly be claimed that the novel helped bring about some positive changes in the system. In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens seems to go far beyond the mere experiences of the workhouse. For depiction of poverty is extended to London's squalid streets, dark houses, and thieves' dens. Thus, Dickens gave voice to those who had no voice, and by so doing he established a link between politics and literature through social

commentary. In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens shocks his readers with the images of poverty and crime: He presents the everyday existence of the lowest members of the English society, and realistically portrays the horrible conditions of the nineteenth century workhouses. Hence his bitter attack on the Poor Law of 1834 which renewed the importance of the workhouse as a means of relief for the poor. *Hard Times* is more than any other of his Condition of England novels that was influenced by Carlyle's social criticism. It deals with a number of social issues: industrial relations, education for the poor, class division and the right of the common people to amusement. It also draws on contemporary concern with reforming divorce laws. Cazamian sees Dickens in *Hard Times* as an "intermediary link between the social thought of Carlyle and Ruskin." While the novel is described by Raymond Williams as "a thorough-going and creative examination of the dominant philosophy of industrialism of the hardness. On the other hand, David Lodge wrote: "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. In *Hard Times* Dickens has created a condition of England novel, which directly engaged with contemporary and social issues. He echoes many of Carlyle's arguments against the power of social machinery and materialist consciousness. However, contrary to Carlyle, Dickens shows that the positive aspects of human nature are not easily

destroyed. Fancy, imagination, compassion and hope do not disappear completely. They are preserved by such characters as Sissy, Rachael and Sleary. Even Mr. Gradgrind reveals eventually some traces of humanness. Ultimately, Dickens did not take up Carlyle's favourite theme of the aristocratic hero as the saviour of a disintegrating society. Coketown, the city of fact, foreshadows the emergence of a monstrous mass urban society based on rationalism, anonymity and dehumanization. The dominant feature of the town is its inherent ugliness. Its inhabitants lack individuality and are the product of an inhuman, materialistic society: "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." In *Hard Times* human relationships are contaminated by economics. Dickens is concerned with the conditions of the urban labourers and the excesses of laissez-faire capitalism. He exposes the exploitation of the working class by unfeeling industrialists and the damaging consequences of propagating factual knowledge at the expense of feeling and imagination. However, although Dickens is critical about utilitarianism, he cannot find a better way of safeguarding social justice than through ethical means. *Hard Times* proves that fancy is essential for human happiness, and in this represent it is one of the best morally uplifting novels. One last state to make is that

Dickens avoided propagating employer paternalism in the manner of Disraeli, Charlotte Bronte and Gaskell. Not only was Dickens the first great urban novelist in England but also the most important social commentators who used fiction effectively to criticize the economic, social, and moral abuses in the Victorian age. He showed compassion and empathy towards the vulnerable and disadvantaged segments of the English society, and contributed to several important social reforms.

Methods: In this research the descriptive analytical method is used. In other words, views about Dickens and his ideas are presented and described, then analyzed and assessed against the three selected novels. The material sources of this research are two-fold; primary and secondary.

* The primary sources are the three selected English novels (1-Oliver Twist, 2-David Copperfield and 3-Hard Times)

* While the secondary sources are books, articles and others relevant writings.

CONCLUSION :

Dickens as a social critic exerted a profound influence on later novelists

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who were concerned about social analysis. It can be stated that Dickens' works played an important role in the implementation of social policies that changed the lives of the poor. Apart from his works, Dickens' active involvement in promoting social reforms raised public awareness in the fight against poverty, deprivation of education, child labour and prostitution. Therefore, Dickens can rightly be considered a reformist as well as a great social critic of the Victorian era. Dickens succeeded in making the Victorian public opinion more aware of the conditions of the poor. He depicted persuasively the disorder, squalor, light, decay, and the human misery of the modern industrial city. *Oliver Twist stands out as* an important manifestation of Victorian social conscience. Dickens believed in the ethical and political potential of literature and the novel in particular. He saw his fiction as a springboard for debates about moral and social reform. In his novel Dickens show himself as a spoken critic of unjust economic and social conditions. His deeply-felt social commentaries helped raise the common awareness of reading public.

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