International Journal of Education, Modern Management, Applied Science & Social Science (IJEMMASSS)
ISSN : 2581-9925, Volume 01, No. 03, July - September, 2019, pp.71-75

CHARLES DICKENS AND THE MECHANICAL AGE

Naresh Shokeen*

ABSTRACT

No two nations pass through similar course of historical progression, but there is one feature that is said to be common to histories of all nations: it has been observed in all societies that in the event of national crisis, men of learning come forward to play, more or less, a decisive role. Human history is replete with examples of philosophers, thinkers, writers, poets, in one word, the 'intelligentsias', responding in their own unique ways to a crisis of national magnitude. When Victorian England faced its moment of truth, the "Litterateur-fraternity", stoop up though belatedly to help find out a way out of the serious situation.

Keywords: *Historical Progression, Litterateur-Fraternity, Violent Class-War, Industrial Revolution.*

Introduction

Mid-nineteenth century was one such period when England faced a plethora of problems of gigantic proportions. Interestingly, it was an epoch with multiple identities; an age of sharp contrasts. England could proudly claim to be the richest country in the world. It could claim to be the first urban, industrial nation in history. But the countenance of unprecedented prosperity also had a dark, ugly, very much visible face which shamed the nation. Slums swarmed England's cities, industries poisoned its skies and rivers; unemployment was rampart and starvation stalked its working populace. The country, it seemed, had reached the breaking-point. There was general apprehension, not without reason, that violent class-war was lurking round the corner. No sensitive soul could remain aloof from such a dreadful scenario. It was clear as crystal to all those who applied their minds to the crisis that philosophy of laissez-faire and unchecked, unregulated Industrial Revolution have been mainly responsible for creating huge socio-economic problems in the mid-nineteenth century. Humphrey house describes the situation thus: "All the complexities of the Industrial Revolution seemed to be coming to a head and the possibility of revolution was rarely far from men's minds between 1834 and 1848. There was an actual class war." It was not only to avert this seemingly inevitable war between workers and capitalists but also out of genuine sympathy for the plight of factory workers, the literary people decided to stand up and be counted. Catherine Gallagher notes that from 1810s until the 1870s, "a vast amount of British intellectual energy was expended on what came to be called the "Condition of England debate", a combined philosophical, social, economic, political, and literary discourse with the topic of industrialization at its center.".

George Orwell in 1940 complained that the novelists have always ignored the ordinary town proletariat, the people who make the wheels go round. PJ. Keating disagrees partially with Or well, asserting that the urban working classes have been suitably dealt with in English fiction. But he unhesitatingly admits that "most working-class novels are, in one way or another, propagandist. They are usually written by authors who are not working class, for an audience which is not working class, and character and environment are presented so as to contain, implicitly or explicitly, a class judgment." Nevertheless, Orwell's charge of neglect of working-class by the novelists cannot be simply be brushed aside. Literary response to the onset of what Thomas Carlyle calls "the Mechanical Age" was lukewarm in the first half of Victorian era. Herbert L. Sussman points out that with very few exceptions during the

* Assistant Professor, SSN College, Delhi University, Delhi, India.

Victorian period the "machine appears in the minor works of major poets or the major works of minor poets". He further says that even the "novelists shied away from confronting the mechanized world." Only the so-called "industrial novelists", very few in number, took up the issue only when ill-effects of Industrial Revolution seemed to be threatening the very stability of the society. Angus Wilson observes in his erudite work, The World of Charles Dickens that he could not come across even a solitary mention of working-class in the sense we use the term today, in any of Dickens's pre-1846 novels.

The novelists played a key role in literary responses to the "Condition of England" question. Their writing helped to focus attention on the human costs of the industrial revolution. In an effort to prick the conscience of their readers, they dramatized the sufferings of the factory-workers; warned of the serious repercussions of the philosophy of Laissez-faire; cautioned public against the dangers of selfish individualism; and urged sympathy, communication and benevolent leadership as remedies for class alienation.

'Past and Present' published in 1843, was Thomas Carlyle's response to the crisis of poverty and class estrangement during the Hungry forties. Inaugurating the "Condition of England" debate, Carlyle rued the fact that despite being full of wealth and multifarious produce, "England is dying of inanition". Carlyle was intensely distressed over the suffering of the working class owing to industrial depression. Unemployment was rampant and the wages of those who still managed some work were often inadequate to meet the cost of the barest necessities. Showering praise on Past and Present, Lionel, Trilling and Harold Bloom remark that "none of Carlyle's works touching upon the nature of man's life in community is more stirring in its representation of the anomalies and injustices of English society in its commitment to the principles materialism and laissez-faire" Expressing his preference for authority and power to be vested in the hands of only a few, Carlyle contrasted the selfish indifference of Laissez-faire industrialists and privileged aristocrats to the responsible paternalism of feudal lords and medieval monks. Alluding to Carlyle's dread of rule by masses, Humphuy House comments wryly: "Carlyle in Chartism and Past and Present, is not only an angry but a frightened man."

Perhaps no book of the Victorian age had so direct, immediate, and enormous an influence. Its effect is to be seen in Disraeli's Sybil (1845); in Kingsley's Alton Locke; in Mrs. Gaskell' s Mary Barton (1848) and North and South (1855). Summing up the general attitude of these novelists Raymond Williams, in his essay 'The Industrial Novels' observes: These novels, when read together, seem to illustrate clearly enough not only the common criticism of industrialism, but also the general structure of feeling which was equally determining. Recognition of evil was balanced by fear of becoming involved. Sympathy was transformed, not into action, but into withdrawal.

All these novelists shared, with Thomas Carlyle, the common prejudices about popular movement and popular rule. Benjamin Disraeli was of the view that the two nations, of rich and poor, could be made into one nation through the restoration to leadership of an 'enlightened aristocracy'. Charles Kingsley, in Cambridge Preface to his novel, Alton Locke, says that the regeneration of society will proceed under the leadership of a truly enlightened aristocracy. It will be a movement towards democracy, but not to that "tyranny of numbers". Carlyle, in Past and Present, went even to the extent of suggesting that medieval inequality and lack of personal freedom were preferable to the modern "liberty to starve".

P.J. Keating suggests that these are very much 'novels about the condition of England as seen from above'. The reason for that lies rather in the limited social philosophies of the novelists. Keating further opines that changes are desired but not changes of too or radical a nature. "They are demanding a revolution in class relationships without any alteration in the balance of power"10. Interestingly, the industrial novelists in a subtle manner, intend to deny the presence of any fundamental social reason for estrangement between the employer and the employee. They make a strong attempt to personalize and individualize class conflict. It is their way of arousing sympathy for the workers' appalling conditions through presentation of a major class-conflict as a minor altercation between two individuals. Their message is loud and clear: there is nothing basically wrong with the social structure as such.

The industrial novelists attempted to drive home their own perception that if personal relationships between individual employees and capitalists are cordiale, it will trickle down to peace between the two warring classes. Mrs. Gaskell presents another instance of exemplary transformation of heart in her second industrial novel, North and South, Higins, the worker is so convinced by John Thornton's change of heart that hearing his master heave a "suppressed sigh" over some inferior workmanship, he returns to the factory at night to some unpaid overtime.

Scenes of physical violence between employers and employees abound in the industrial novel. In Mary Barton, Mr. Carson's son is murdered by a Chartist; in North and South, John Thornton narrowly escapes wild, beastly intentions of a mob of strikers; in Sybil, one of the Wodgate employers beats his employees with anything that comes to hand, splitting open their heads and faces. Both employers and workers are blamed for this violence. Berjamin Disraeli is particularly more ruthless in allotting a share of blame to individual members of the working classes. The novelist, in Sybil, treats the trade union leader, Dandy Mick with heavy irony. Mick is presented as a sadistic Marxist who seeks pleasure in worsening social conditions. The leader of the workers is also shown to be a hypocrite and a turncoat. When the eagerly awaited riot takes place, Dandy Mick remains loyal to Sybil, is rewarded suitably and becomes a 'capitalist'.

The Victorian middle class always had a nagging fear of the potential power of the workers. What will happen if the workers consolidate and unite under one leader and transform their potential power into a live mass force? The mass-identity of industrial workers looked frightening to the middle class. The industrial novelists seemed fully seized of the matter and they did what best they could do. Through their fiction, they not only denigrated union leaders by trying to prove misguided anyone who thought like Slackbrige or Dandy Mick, but also attempted to demoralise workers by damning mass agitations. It is shown in the novels that mass demonstrations generally get out of head, leading to arbitrary violence, looting and arson. It ultimately backfires on the workers because the initial public sympathy for worker's cause is replaced by horror. This effect is achieved when the agitating strikers in Mrs. Gaskell's Mary Barton and North and South viciously attack non-union workers; in Hard Times, one of the causes which brings about Stephen Blackpool's death is union solidarity; and in Sybil, Alton Locke and Felix Holt, mass demonstrations disintegrate into bloody riots.

In Mrs. Gaskell's novel Mary Barton, John Barton who murders Harry Carson, is appointed by a trade union. One implication of this incident could be that trade unionists are murderers and anarchists. Raymond Williams describes this incident as a "dramatization of the fear of violence which was widespread among the upper and middle class at the time." Throughout there was an apprehension that the working people might take matters into their own hands. Williams suggests that Carson's murder in the novel is "an imaginative working-out of this fear and of reaction t6 it, rather than any kind of observed and considered experience." How did Charles Dickens the leading Victorian novelist, react to the deeply disturbing decades of 1840s and 50s? Was literary response to the crisis any different from the responses of Thomas Carlyle, Mrs. Elizabeth Gaskell, Benjamin Disraeli, Charles Kingsley or George Eliot? Was he favourably disposed to the cause of the working classes or, to use Marxist terminology, the 'proletariat'?

Dickens's attitude vis-a-vis industrial workers and Industrial Revolution makes an interesting study, indeed. Critical opinion on this issue seems sharply divided. One view is that the greatest Victorian novelist was always ambivalent and ambiguous when it came to the burning issues concerning labour-capitalist conflict and repercussions of Industrial Revolution. The other view holds that Dickens was very forthright and explicit in his outlook on issues confronting Victorian society in mid-nineteenth century, but his approach in dealing with these concerns was very balanced and dispassionate. No wonder, Dickens has been claimed with equal enthusiasm, both by the radicals and the conservatives. George Orwell, in his essay Charles Dickens quotes two Marxist Writers, T.A., Jackson and Nadezhda Krupskaya, both of whom hold completely contrary opinion about Dickens. Jackson makes spirited efforts to turn Dickens into a blood-thirsty revolutionary. Krupskaya, on the other hand, paints the celebrated Victorian novelist as a 'bourgeois'. Comments Orwell: "The Marxist claims him as "almost" a Marxist; the Catholic claims him as "almost" a Catholic, and both claim him as a champion of the proletariat or "the poor" as Chesterton would have put it." Orwell goes on to say that "even if Dickens was a bourgeois, he was certainly a subversive writer, a radical, one might truthfully say, a rebel."

Dickens's ambivalent stance is reflected when, on many occasions in his fiction, he creates a pressure for social change and even upheaval, but at the same time expresses fear of the violence that would accompany such an upheaval. Many critics rue the fact that although Dickens arouses the revolutionary impulse, he hardly does anything to suggest a specific constructive programme to give a direction to such revolutionary urge. George H. Ford and Lauriat Lane Jr., however, defend Dickens's approach, saying that it is the revolutionary role of literature of imaginative art "to stir the sympathy and imaginative identification that vitalize conscious, reconstructive reform". On one hand, critics like Angus Wilson criticize Dickens for completely ignoring industrial proletariat in his pre-1846 novels. It's serious charge considering 1840s has been infamously dubbed as the Hungry Forties. But, on the other hand, there are critics who are angry with the novelist for painting working-class life in too glowing terms. T.B. Macaulay, who shared with many Victorians an exaltation at the material advances of nineteenth century,

was very severe on Dickens. He went to the extent of condemning Hard Times for its "sullen Socialism". However, another group of critics feels that neither did he ignore concerns of working class completely nor did he go overboard to glorify the factory workers. The sense of oppression, helplessness, suffering or unhappiness permeates Dickens's novels. When he espoused the humanitarian cause of all oppressed; when he championed the cause of all victims of poverty and injustice, he spoke for all poor and that includes the working-class sections of them.

Dickens's political creed is another instance of his ambivalent outlook. In The City of Dickens by Alexander Welsh, one gets to read about Dickens's address to the Birmingham and Midland Institute in September, 1869 where the novelist stated: "My faith in the people governing is, on the whole, infinitesimal; my faith in the people governed, is on the whole, illimitable." There was an immediate out cry over the apparent liberalism of the statement. The implication of the statement is that popular franchise was not essential to force the government to good governance. The enlightened public opinion of people, with or without franchise, is more than sufficient for successful management of the nation. This doctrine was the most common creed of the Victorian age. Charles Dickens shared with Thomas Carlyle, to whom he dedicated his only industrial novel, Hard Times, and other industrial novelists, a very deep suspicion of popular rule. All those novelists equated popular rule with mob-rule. Another common view which these novelists share is that all of them are paranoid about activities of trade unionists. As pointed out by Raymond Williams: "In Hard Times, the trade unions are dismissed by a stock Victorian reaction.

Stephen Blackpool is shown to advantage because be will not join the union". George Orwell fully agrees with Williams. He says: "Trade unionism in Hard Times, is represented as something not much better than a racket, something that happens because employers are not sufficiently paternal. Stephen Blackpool's refusal to join the union is rather a virtue in Dickens's eyes". In the ordinary accepted sense of the word, Dickens's is not revolutionary writer. To quote Orwell again:

"The truth is that Dickens's criticism of society is almost exclusively moral. Hence the utter lack of any constructive suggestions anywhere in his work. He attacks the law, parliamentary government, the educational system and so forth, without ever clearly suggesting what he would put in their places. Dickens's attitude is at bottom not even destructive. There is no clear sign that he wants the existing order to be over thrown, or that he believes it would make very much difference if it were overthrown. For in reality his target is not so much society as "human nature."

Dickens was a staunch opponent of laissez-faire theory, but he was not a socialist. Nowhere does one come across in his books a passage suggesting that the prevalent economic system is wrong as a system.

Nowhere does he make any attack on private enterprise or private property. From whole of his work, the one clear cut message is that if men would behave decently the world would be a better place to live in. As Ivor Brown puts it in his essay, Dickens as Social Reformer. "He was never a socialist. As a social reformer, he demanded decency and generosity. Dickens did much to stir the public conscience. He was mellowing the climate of opinion."

To the industrial novelists there was little difference in effect between Chartism, Socialism, Communism or Trade unionism. All these movements weakened the social viewpoint they themselves wished to advance conciliation between the classes on terms put forward by exemplary employers. Dickens believed that 'kindliness and benevolence' could solve all the differences between capitalists and workers. Any movement towards solidarity on the part of the workers was considered destructive of peace in the society. Mrs. Elizabeth Gaskell wants to convey through her novels the thinking that the division of society into classes of men hostile to each other has got nothing to do with the pressures of industrialism, but rather results from the indifference and ignorance of employees, Had they treated the workman as 'brethren and friends' and explained that it was the wise policy of the time for sacrifices to be made on both sides, then the misunderstanding that is the root cause of class conflict would have been removed.

The industrial novelists were writing at a time when virtually everyone feared revolution was about to happen any moment. The striking achievement of the novelists was that they managed to partially douse the raging fire. Without explicitly uttering a word in favour of the capitalists/industrialists, the novelists came to their rescue and took the sting out of the criticism against them. The situation in mid-nineteenth century was ripe for a sweeping revolution. If the revolution did not come, it had something to do with the climate of opinion built up by the industrial novelists.

References

- Alexander Welsh, the City of Dickens (London: Oxford University Press, 1971) p. 33.
- Catherine Gallagher, the Industrial Novel in David Scott Kastan, ch. ed. The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature, Vol. 3 (London: Oxford University Press, 2006) p. 100.
- David Damrosch, gen. ed. The Longman Anthology of British Literature, Vol. 2 (New York: Longman, 1999) p. 1082.
- EWF Tomlin, ed. Charles Dickens 1812-1870 A Centenary Volume (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969) p. 144.
- George H. Ford And Lauriat Lane, Jr., eds. The Dickens Critics (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1961) p. 7.
- George Orwell, Charles Dickens in Williams Ross Clark, ed. Discussions of Charles Dickens (Boston: Heath and Company, 1961) p. 30.
- Herbert L. Sussman, Victorians and the Machine, The Literary Response to Technology (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1968) p. 3
- House, op. cit p. 49.
- Humphrey House, The Dickens World 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 149.
- Ibid p. 145
- Ibid p. 3.
- Ibid p. 30.
- Ibid pp. 231-232.
- Ibid. pp. 31-32.
- Keating , op. cit. p. 227 II.Ibid pp. 231.
- Lionel Trilling and Harold Bloom, Victorian Prose and Poetry (London: Oxford University Press, 1973) p. 16.
- Orwell, op. cit p. 33
- PJ. Keating, The working Classes in Victorian Fiction. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971) p. 2.
- Raymond Williams, The Industrial Novel in Ian Watt, ed. The Victorian Novel, Modern Essays in Criticism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971) p.163.
- Williams, op. cit. p. 145
- Williams, op. cit. p. 150

❖◆❖