

# Hard Times and Victorian Urban Society

Ramesha H.R.

Assistant Professor Department of English, Field Marshal K.M. Cariappa College, Madikeri-571201, Karnataka State, India

---

**Abstract:** This essay focuses upon the relation between father and children; school and the children; husband and wife; the owner and the factory workers. Here it is shown how Victorian society had some social barriers between people and materialism collapses human relations. Since the novel written when European Industrialization was at its pinnacle it is studied here how education system, utilitarian philosophy became futile having no human concern. Lastly society and individual's role has been closely studied.

**Keywords:** Society, Family, Victorian Period, Culture, Working-class people, Industrialization, Materialism, Education and Utilitarianism.

---

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As many critics thought, after Shakespeare, Dickens has created in his novels unforgettable characters. But on the other hand, we should not forget what R.C.Churchill in his famous essay-‘The Genius of Charles Dickens’ has said.

*‘Dickens is the greatest genius in English Literature. But I also believe that no writer of any distinction at all has ever produced so much rubbish. And unfortunately the genius and the rubbish exist side by side in the same novels.’* Dickens, being the critical insider of his times delineated the very psyche of Victorian society. Andrew Sanders, a noted literary historian, in his *The Short History of English Literature*, pointed out that his novels reflected the nature of Victorian urban society with all its conflicts and disharmonies; its eccentricities and its constructions; its energy and its extraordinary fertility both physical and intellectual.

Novels, for Dickens, are not merely something that entertains people nor just literary pieces but it is a parameter to study and evaluate the society and its mood and people. The society in which he was born and brought up was full of revolutionary changes. The Industrialization was at its pinnacle. Society was extremely materialistic. It had scant respect for the sufferings of the working classes and was more interested in profit making. And, coincidentally Matthew Arnold, a distinguished poet and critic of the age, in his masterpiece *‘Culture and Anarchy’* had criticized the Victorian urban society expressing his distrust that the very sole aim of Victorian society was materialistic progress.

Among his famous novels ‘Hard Times’ according to many critics, has occupied a unique space. It speaks of so many issues such as education, relationship between factory workers and owners, parents-children relationship and so on. To unearth cruelties of Victorian urban society he used irony and wit very subtly.

The very first lines of the novel are striking:

*“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. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principal on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, Sir!”*

This is what the owner of the education institution wants. He wants his children to be taught facts; but not imagination or creativity. The concept of education highly ridiculed here. Education is meant for attaining freedom and individuality. But

the speaker Mr Gradgrind believes that facts only can rule the life. In this way he has been the responsible for murdering innocent pupil's inventiveness and imagination.

Classroom, the town-coketown, factory-industrial area, Circus Company and its atmosphere and more over architecture are the fine example of knowing the society where in the novel is set. And they represent the Victorian urban society and its mood and attitude.

Class room, Dickens portrays, is not a comfortable ambience for learning. Syllabus which is taught is also highly ridiculous. By interfering with the education and teaching method being used in the institution, Mr Gradgrind and Mr.Bounderby suppress the creative energy and freedom of the innocent school going kids. And school teacher Mr.M'choakumchild also joins his hands with them in underestimating the children asking them to define a horse. Dickens condemns Victorian education system and its backbone ideology-utilitarianism. This philosophy was also called 'Philosophical Radicalism' or 'Benthamism'. The goal of it was the greatest happiness of the greatest number. This philosophy largely relied on statistics, rules and regulations. Individualism and imagination are scarcely considered. The speaker Mr.Gradgrind represents 'Utilitarianism' within the novel. As he raises his children, he stresses facts over imagination and function over feelings. Mr.Gradgrind heavily interferes with his children's schooling. So he becomes the responsible for their failure in their life.

He married his daughter Louisa to the Coketown's wealthy and rich man, banker, manufacturer and his friend Mr.Bounderby. Of course he is very insensitive also. Because he too measures and understands life in terms of materialistic view. He is middle aged also. For Mr.Gradgrind what matters is man's position, social, economical and political status. He completely fails in understanding his own children's feelings and sentiments. As a result Louisa failed in her marital life; where as his son Tom is misled in involving criminal activity like stealing money from the bank where he works. The education which upholds only facts cannot help his children.

Not the money nor even social status, but humanity, good character and conduct, moralities and ethics are to be important. But Mr.Gradgrind forgets these. Title of the opening chapter is very apt as it very subtly says that one thing needful. Paradoxically what is needed is not needed to him.

The Victorian society was full of inequalities- haves and have nots; poor and rich; working class and owners; circus people and elite people. Sissy Jupe, a daughter of an entertainer in the circus company. In the novel he is not directly seen but heard by his daughter. Because he has left his daughter and gone else where. She becomes an orphan, later she is looked after by Mr.Gradgrind. In the city there are millions of orphans like Sissy Jupe. She is a catalyst for the recognition of a form of knowledge separate from Mr.Gradgrind's Fact- that of experience and of the heart and compassion. She is very humble and down to earth. Dickens has used her to show the social change can only come from outside Coketown. She emerges at the end of the novel *Hard Times* as a companion and moral supporter to Louisa following her emotional explosion and as a comforter to Rachael before the whereabouts of Stephen is discovered. Rachael is the representative of an honest working class. But in the end she loses Stephen. So she becomes alone in the society as well as life.

Stephen is one among millions who are suffered by their employers. Neither is he successful as family man nor factory worker. He is victimized. Even law also cannot help him.

The setting of the novel is another striking thing to be noticed. In all respects it is factory ridden urban town. The novel takes place in Coketown, a mill town; that is polarized between the industrialists on the one side and, working class men on the other side. Working class community especially factory workers are recognized as hands. They are never considered as human being having heart and soul like anybody else. They are just like machines acting as the directions of their masters (owners).

Dickens provides a unique description of Coketown as a physical environment...

*"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 town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of the which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that 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 the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness...."*

And also Mr. M'choakumchild's school room's description. It is plain, bare, monotonous vault of a school room. And even Mr. Gradgrind's face repeats this pattern with its "square wall of a forehead".

So in this regard it can be said that this unique emphasis by Dickens on the repetition of the factory structure in every aspect of Coketown's life has often been viewed as Dickens's recognition of the shameness of factory work and the alienated nature of its system of production. The seeds of the Marxism can be traced here. Dickens has shown the inhuman attitude and exploitation of the factory owners. Ultimately sufferers are poor and helpless factory workers like Stephen Blackpool.

It can be said that Dickens throughout this novel has tried at his best in unearthing cruel, hypocritical, and inhuman face and materialistic attitude of the Victorian urban society. It may be said in Wordsworthian terms saying that world is too much with it (that Victorian urban society) and for them getting and spending is much more important than understanding human relations. The society and the people wherein living are concerned with commodities and morally deprived of will soon be ethically degraded. Life without which has no meaning.

## 2. CONCLUSION

As Khalil Gibran in his *Prophet* puts, parents cannot fully control their children. They are not owner of their children, instead, they are like medium through them their children have come to this universe to live, think and act freely. Shakespeare's *King Lear* is also remembered here. When parents fail in understanding the feelings and letting space for their (children) life will be disastrous and tragic. Homes or society turn to be jails. In this novel Dickens has very subtly shown how dreams and aspirations of innocent lives are murdered by the excessive interference of ideologically-ridden father. Totally Victorian society had given space and importance for ideology and theory but not for individual choice and freedom. So the result is their life is full of hard times. Victorian Period's philosophy like 'Utilitarianism' and 'Materialistic attitude of Victorian society have been critically portrayed in this novel. As cities grow there arose problems like unemployment, pollution, population etc. people from village started to migrate towards cities in search of jobs and obviously factories in cities attract people. Those who leaving their homes come and start their life in cities are culturally disconnected, because their strong roots are in villages. Once human being loses his cultural memories and rituals he may not emotionally strong. So human relationships lack emotional and sentimental bond. This tendency leads human beings to be very mechanical. The novel *Hard Times* portrays all these changes in a very subtle way. When this novel written urban societies were growing very fast attracting people. And also, this was the period of transition. That transition was in a detail manner observed by the novelist Charles Dickens. This novel is like an epitome of the Victorian urban society. Of course all most all his novels are set in urban societies

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Author is thankful for the editor and the team of the magazine for their valuable suggestions and advice.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Churchill, R. C 'The Genius of Charles Dickens'. The New Pelican Guide to English Literature. Vol.6: From Dickens to Hardy. Ed. Boris Ford. London: Penguin, 1996.
- [2] Dickens, Charles. *Hard Times*. New Delhi: UBSPD, 1995.
- [3] Gibran, Khalil. *Prophet*. New Delhi: Penguin.
- [4] Nanjundaiah, C.S, D.S.Manjunath, M.L. Samaga, Parvathi Aithal. ed. William Shakespeare: *King Lear*. Shimoga: Abhiruchi Prakashana, 2002.
- [5] Sanders, Andrew. *The Short Oxford History of English Literature (Third Indian Edition)*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006.