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Comparative Study Of The Depiction Of Children In The Novels Of Charles Dickens And Mulk Raj Anand

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to comparatively analyse the perspectives of Charles Dickens and Mulk Raj Anand on children and their exploitation. Both writers advocate equality and rebel against discrimination, casteism and class division. Their concern for the marginalized originates from their own childhood experiences. The study focuses on Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1837) and *Hard Times* (1854) and Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936). Both authors portray slums, poverty, and economic insecurity realistically and suggest an optimistic future based on humanism. While Dickens critiques the Victorian workhouse system and utilitarian education, Anand critiques caste oppression and colonial exploitation. The paper concludes that both are not only great storytellers but also great humanists with a moral and humanistic vision of life.

Keywords: Children, Society, Exploitation, Caste System, Poverty, Humanism

INTRODUCTION

Charles John Huffam Dickens (1812-1870) was an English novelist, journalist, short story writer and social critic. He created some of literature's best-known fictional characters and is regarded as one of the greatest novelists of the Victorian era. His major novels include *The Pickwick Papers* (1836), *Oliver Twist* (1837-39), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39), *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41), *Dombey and Son* (1848), *David Copperfield* (1850), *Bleak House* (1852-53), *Hard Times* (1854), *Little Dorrit* (1855-57), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *Great Expectations* (1860-61) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65).

Dickens was born on 7 February 1812 in Landport, Portsmouth. His father, John Dickens, worked as a clerk in the Navy Pay Office. John Dickens considered himself a gentleman but was financially feckless. Dickens faced severe hardship when his father was imprisoned in the Marshalsea Debtors' Prison under the Insolvent Debtors Act of 1813. At the age of twelve, Dickens left school to work in a rat-infested boot-blackening factory where he pasted labels on blacking pots. The alienation and humiliation he experienced there left a lasting impact on his personality and literature. After his father's release, he returned to school before beginning his literary career as a journalist.

Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004), a socially committed Indian novelist, produced a great deal of literature. He wrote more than a dozen novels and about seventy short stories. His main focus was the suffering, misery and predicament of the poor due to exploitation of the downtrodden classes. His themes mainly deal with poverty, exploitation, society and casteism. Like Dickens, Anand wrote about the real world, poor people and social injustice.

The Romantic perception of childhood influenced Dickens. William Wordsworth wrote in 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality' (1807), 'The child is father of the man,' emphasizing the importance of a happy childhood. William Blake was among the first to recognize the value of childhood, viewing innocence as the epitome of joy. These writers elevated the child to a divine status.

In the eighteenth century, a new educational interest in the child emerged. Earlier, the child was seen as an asset with a utilitarian approach. However, the dogmatic attitude towards the child did not alter until the advent of science and objective thought in the Age of Reason.

CHILD EXPLOITATION IN OLIVER TWIST AND UNTOUCHABLE

Charles Dickens highlighted various social problems. One of the best-known texts on child abuse from the Victorian era is *Oliver Twist*. The novel exposes the shortcomings of the workhouse system and the condition of the weakest section of Victorian society.

Oliver is born in a workhouse. His mother, Agnes Fleming, was abandoned and impoverished. She was admitted to the workhouse as an act of charity and died after childbirth, attended by an inebriated midwife. Oliver, being illegitimate and an orphan, is described as 'the orphan of a workhouse - the humble, half-starved drudge - to be cuffed and buffeted through the world - despised by all, and pitied by none' (Chapter 2).

The orphans are underfed and given only gruel. Oliver dares to ask for more: 'The evening arrived; the boys took their places. The master, in his cook's uniform, stationed himself at the copper; his pauper assistants ranged themselves behind him; the gruel was served out; and a long grace was said over the short commons. The gruel disappeared; the boys whispered to each other, and winked at Oliver; while his next neighbours nudged him. Child as he was, he was desperate with hunger, and reckless with misery. He rose from the table; and advancing to the master, basin and spoon in hand, said: somewhat alarmed at his own temerity: Please, sir, I want some more.'

Anand's Untouchable covers the period 1930-1940, when poverty and inhuman exploitation were at their peak. In Untouchable, Bakha is the protagonist, son of Lakha, a jamadar, belonging to the lower caste. He is a sweeper boy and latrine cleaner. He starts his day cleaning latrines with brush and bucket. After cleaning roads, he goes to a nearby alley to beg for food. A woman throws a chapatti for him. He suffers hunger all day because he is considered untouchable. When Bakha returns home, he tells his father that the upper castes think of them as dirt because they clean their dirt.

In Oliver Twist, Oliver feels alone and having nobody to care for him, whereas in Untouchable, Bakha also feels alone, though he has a father, Lakha, who is not affectionate enough and always abuses him verbally. Thus, in different centuries - Dickens depicting 19th-century England and Anand depicting 20th-century colonial India - both talk about the same themes.

GIRL CHILD AND EMOTIONAL EXPLOITATION

Another incidence of exploitation is best expressed through Sohini, Bakha's sister in Untouchable. She is an example of both caste and sexual exploitation. Sohini is exploited by Pandit Kali Nath, a high-caste Hindu priest, which shows hypocrisy. He shouts: 'Polluted, polluted, polluted! Get off the steps, scavenger! Off with you! You have defiled our whole service! You have defiled our temple! Now we will have to pay for the purificatory ceremony.'

In Coolie, Munoo's childhood impulsiveness is destroyed by inhuman masters when he is sent to work in town by his uncle. He is treated like a dog, prohibited from any amusement, not permitted to play with his master's children.

In Hard Times, Louisa, daughter of Mr. Gradgrind, is married to Bounderby only for utilitarian purpose. She is not allowed to make friends. She says: 'I can't play to you, or sing to you. I can't talk to you so as to lighten your mind, for I never see any amusing sights or read any amusing books that it would be a pleasure or a relief to you to talk about, when you are tired.'

Gradgrind's inculcation of facts subduing all emotions makes his son Tom undisciplined and he commits robbery. Dickens successfully portrays child exploitation.

CONCLUSION

Dickens showed compassion and empathy towards the downtrodden, lower-class, vulnerable and disadvantaged segments of English society because he could relate to them. His deep social commitment is derived from his traumatic childhood.

Thus, it can be concluded that both novelists possess many similarities. Both have beautifully portrayed poverty, poor slum conditions and economic problems in a realistic way. The most striking thing is that they are not only good storytellers but also great humanists whose vision is moralistic and humanistic.

The difference lies in resolution: Dickens resolves through individual benevolence and a middle-class benefactor who later adopts him, whereas Anand suggests collective social change, Gandhian reform and eradication of the caste system. Dickens's approach is reformist, Anand's is revolutionary.

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