



RESEARCH ARTICLE

PORTRAYAL OF CHILD ABUSE AND SOCIAL CRIME IN *OLIVER TWIST*.

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Abstract

Child Abuse and Social Crime are inter-related as the former is the consequence of the latter. Society is largely responsible for the condition of its members. Charles Dickens exposed numerous social drawbacks in his novels. *Oliver Twist* is regarded as a Victorian Era text book of Child Abuse. As the novel progresses the drawbacks, of the workhouses and the underworld of the nineteenth century Victorian society, are exposed. The child protagonist experienced an extremely harsh life under very difficult conditions until he finally found a benefactor, (who later adopts him).

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Introduction:-

Dickens tried to relive his lost childhood through the numerous child characters whom he made to live in his novels. Dickens not only had immense sympathy for children but also felt great concern about the state of affairs in his contemporary society. Child Abuse and Social Crime are inter-related as the former is the consequence of the latter. Society is largely responsible for the condition of its members. In the nineteenth century industrialization and progress, the conflict between money and love eventually took its toll on the welfare of children. The situation was grim, particularly for those who were orphan, poor, destitute and downtrodden. Charles Dickens expressed his disapproval and concern for the existing social norms. He emphasized the irresponsibility towards children through his works. He attracted the attention of the public to the wretched and pathetic condition of the poor, the orphans and members the lower strata of the nineteenth century society.

Charles Dickens exposed numerous social drawbacks in his novels. *Oliver Twist* is regarded as a Victorian Era text book of Child Abuse. As the novel progresses the drawbacks, of the workhouses and the underworld of the nineteenth century Victorian society, are exposed. The child protagonist experienced an extremely harsh life under very difficult conditions until he finally found a benefactor, (who later adopts him). Right from the time of his birth Oliver Twist encountered starvation, suppression, corruption and violence. *Oliver Twist* is the story of the protagonist's journey through life and the vicissitudes he combated during the initial stage of his life. Charles Dickens was extremely sensitive over issues related to children. He could not tolerate injustice done to the weakest section of the society, namely children. Oliver's Mother, Agnes Fleming, was brought to the workhouse for the delivery of her child. She had no one to look after her and was penniless; therefore as an act of Charity she was admitted in the workhouse. Agnes was attended upon by a drunken midwife. Unfortunately, Agnes passed away soon after giving birth to Oliver. He was an illegitimate child as Agnes was

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unmarried and could not reveal the name of the child's father. Thus Oliver was, "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." (O.T., Ch. II)

The nineteenth century rigid society refused to accept an unwed-mother therefore Agnes was an outcast. The workhouse authority took the responsibility of adopting the outcasts of the society but the treatment the inmates received was unendurable and often worsened their plight. The insensitivity of the caretakers, and their indifference towards their duty, made inmates suffer, especially those who depended upon them for their basic necessities. As Oliver was orphaned from his birth Dickens says—

"Now, if during this brief period Oliver had been surrounded by careful grandmothers, anxious aunts, experienced nurses, and doctors of profound wisdom, he would most inevitably and indubitably have been killed in no time. There being nobody by, however, but a pauper old woman, who was rendered rather misty by an unwonted allowance of beers and a parish surgeon, who did such matters by contract; Oliver and Nature fought out the point between them." (O.T., Ch. I).

The substitute parents he got in the form of Mrs. Mann, the keeper of the baby farm, and Mr. Bumble, the caretaker of the workhouse, were responsible for increasing his distress. The ill-fate which befell Oliver from the time of his birth continued for considerable period of time. Being deprived of emotional security, love, food, clothing, Oliver was unaware of the feeling of comfort and security which makes childhood blissful. The plight was not confined to Oliver but the whole under-privileged section of society. Small children could not put up any kind of resistance therefore were destined to suffer the harshness.

For nine years Oliver lived in a, "wretched home where one kind word or look had never lighted the gloom of his infant years." The harrowing ordeals he encountered in the workhouse made him, "a pale thin child, somewhat diminutive in stature and decidedly small in circumference." His struggle, which began soon after his birth, grew with the passing years. On his ninth birthday, Oliver was shifted from the baby farm to the workhouse by Mr. Bumble, who would give a pat on the back and head with a stick, to make him lively, after making him walk for miles. This strange behaviour of Mr. Bumble made Oliver cry. Dickens portrays the simple, uncomplicated world of a child. On being questioned by a gentleman of the board, which was to decide the future of Oliver, was he an 'Orphan', Oliver could not answer as he was unaware of whom an orphan was. Dickens writes, "What a noble illustration of the tender laws of England! They let the paupers go to sleep!"

Dickens strove to expose the wickedness and rot which had pervaded the industrialized society of the nineteenth century. The caretaker of the baby farm, Mrs. Mann was an extremely selfish woman, who can be labeled as a blot on womanhood. Women are regarded as symbol of love, affection and care but the deformity of this lady stopped her from performing humane actions. Mrs. Mann squandered the major part of the allowance on herself, leaving small children starved and ragged.

Oliver Twist draws the attention of its reader to various social evils prevalent in the nineteenth century contemporary society. The ineffective poor law, child labour, pathetic condition of the workhouses and recruitment of small children by the underworld have been dealt with unsparing honesty. The workhouse provided no solace to the already disturbed mind of Oliver Twist as the torture inflicted upon him were of no less degree than what he had been enduring since his birth. The boys of the workhouse were mal-nourished and ill-fed; rather they were on the verge of starvation. Desperate for a square meal, they drew lots. The loser would have to ask for another portion of gruel. As luck would have it, the task fell upon Oliver, who was equally desperate for a second helping and therefore agreed to ask for more gruel. Dickens writes—

"....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, desperate with hunger, 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.'" (O.T. Ch. II)

The audacity of an orphan was regarded as an act of perversion by Mr. Bumble and the board members. Oliver's request for more gruel astonished the caretakers of the workhouse, as it was the greatest offence to question their arrangement and management. The impudence to analyze the entire system, (which primarily comprised of food and clothing), was frowned upon and the offender taken to task. Yet the children were scarcely fed and barely clothed. The immediate outcome of this insolence of Oliver was solitary confinement. Dickens writes—

"For a week later after the commission of the impious and profane offence of asking for more, Oliver remained a close prisoner in the dark and solitary room to which he had been consigned by the wisdom and mercy of the board. It appears at first sight not unreasonable to suppose that, if he had entertained a becoming feeling of respect for the prediction of the gentleman in the white waistcoat, he would have established that sage individual's prophetic character, once and forever, by tying one end of his pocket handkerchief to a hook in the wall, and attaching himself to the other." (O.T. Ch. III)

The ordeal did not end Here:-

"There was a still greater obstacle in Oliver's youth and childishness. He only cried bitterly all day; and when the long dismal night came on, he spread his little hands before his eyes to shut out the darkness, and crouching in the corner, tried to sleep; ever and anon waking with a start and tremble, and drawing himself closer and closer to the wall, as if to feel even its cold hard surface were a protection in the gloom and loneliness which surrounded him. (O.T. Ch. III)

The hardships inflicted upon Oliver had no limit or end, and was further extended to making him perform his ablutions under cold water of the pump during winter. He was brought to the dining hall everyday to set an example, thus forbidding other boys to be defiant. The boy of nine was made to endure torture which the adults would dread.

Asking for adequate food is a fundamentals right of an individual yet its denial went by unnoticed; rather it put forth the failure of the system. Orphans were kept on meagre diet, virtually starved, and the members the board whom Dickens described as 'very sage, deep, philosophical men' were served with delicacies at the cost of young children's square meal. They were the ones who resented Oliver's demand. His request was considered a revolt against the system and society which were indifferent to the interests of the outcasts. The response Oliver got was imprisonment in a stuffy dark room. Claustrophobia and fear filled the heart of the little boy and he was, consequently, submerged in unbearable gloom and loneliness. Eventually, the wise members of the board decided upon getting rid of Oliver and a bill was pasted outside the workhouse which offered five pounds to anyone who would take the little boy. Oliver would have been taken away by a chimney-sweep, Mr Grimwig, but the kind-hearted old magistrate saw his pale and terrified face. On being asked by the gentleman if he would like to go with Mr. Grimwig, Oliver immediately refused and the kind words spoken by the old magistrate drove him to tears. Since his birth he had never heard a single word of kindness. For the first time he experienced sympathy. The pitiful outburst of Oliver enkindled feeling of compassion and sympathy in the old gentleman thus preventing him to sign the papers. The indenture was cancelled and Mr. Bumble was instructed to treat the boy with kindness. Later he was given to Mr. Sowerberry, the undertaker. The boy of nine was unaware of any relation or companions and knew the feelings of hatred and contempt. As he was friendless, he had no one to remember, thus he was ignorant of the pangs of separation. Dickens writes—

"The boy had no friends to care for, or to care for him. The regret of no recent separation was fresh in his mind; the absence of no loved and well-remembered face sunk heavily into his heart. But his heart was heavy, not withstanding; and he wished, as he crept into his narrow bed, that were his coffin, and that he could be laid in a calm and lasting sleep in the Churchyard ground, with the tall grass waving gently above his head, and the sound of the old deep bell to soothe him in his sleep." (O.T., Ch. IV)

At the undertaker's Oliver's afflictions did not end, as he was abused and beaten by Noah Claypole, the charity-boy at Mr Sowerberry's. The undertaker used Oliver as a 'mute mourner.' The suffering inflicted upon him made the entire persona of the nine years old pitiful. It was unfortunate that a young

boy who was hardly exposed to the outer world was used for such a solemn purpose. Since making money was the utilitarian purpose of the industrialized nineteenth century society, children were not spared from being exposed to the atrocities of the world.

Oliver performed the job dutifully and his progress in work gained his master's kindness, who found him useful. While working with the undertaker, Oliver got the opportunity to closely observe the behaviour of people. He discovered that people very soon overcome the agony of losing their relatives. This was Oliver's first exposure to the outer world. During this period, by observing people closely, Oliver came to understand artificialities and the false attitude of individuals. Being too young Oliver was unable to fully understand the cunning and heartlessness.

Noah Claypole thought himself to be superior to Oliver as his parentage was known. Being 'meanest of individual' himself, he would not leave the slightest chance of traumatizing Oliver. The harsh Victorian society inflicted immense pressure upon the waifs, which eventually converted the young boys into juvenile delinquents. Noah was the product of the system Dickens was attacking. Despite all the obnoxious activities of Noah, he cannot be placed in the gallery of villains portrayed by Charles Dickens; rather he can be classified as a victim. Oliver had been enduring Noah's ill-treatment until the latter spoke abusively about his mother. Noah's comment infuriated the otherwise 'timid' lad and caused him to strike the former. Consequently, Oliver was brutally beaten by his master and locked up in a dirty room. To compound Oliver's woes, the entire incident was related to Mr. Bumble, who was called upon by Noah Claypole. He drew the conclusion that it was the effect of meat (which was served to Oliver) which had spoiled Oliver and instigated him to vent his fury on Noah. He said,

"You've overfed him, Ma'am. You're raised a artificial soul and spirit in him Ma'am, unbecoming a person of his condition; as the board, Mrs Sowerberry, who are practical philosophers, will tell you. What have paupers to do with soul or spirit? It's quite enough that let'em have live bodies. If you had kept the boy on gruel, Ma'am, this would never have happened." (O.T., Ch. VII)

The Victorian society, amidst a mist all the progress it made in the field of industrialization and science, turned its back on the outcasts of the society. *Oliver Twist* relates the harrowing ordeals of social outcasts. These unfortunate souls led a traumatic life. Their life and death went by unnoticed by those who were responsible for their agony. From the time of birth they were shunted from one institution to another. At no point of time and time they found solace and security. In the baby farm the nurses would starve them, beat them and inflict unendurable torture. Babies rolled on the floor unclothed and unfed in the baby farms. Words like sympathy, care, love were unheard of. The hardships which began right from their first breath continued till the last. In some rare cases, the unfortunate souls were blessed with benefactors to adopt them and reform their lives.

Oliver's solitude and agony began with the first breath he drew. Neglect and abject squalor, compounded with starvation and regular beating made his life miserable. The question that lay ahead was not of succeeding or rising but of survival. Dickens strove to show that the struggle of Oliver is not just of survival but the desire to overcome the fear of being completely cut off from the outer world. The world of criminals was not the place Oliver had ever thought of inhabiting. The challenge confronted here was of preserving himself from being suffocated and dragged into the net. Oliver's inherent purity and simplicity helped him overcome the hardships and hurdles in the path of survival. The matter of major concern for Oliver was to rediscover his own identity. He was not able to adapt according to his surroundings, rather, in a subtle manner he dared to raise his voice when needed and showed his resentment. Dickens through the novel *Oliver Twist* calls upon the attention of its readers to various social evils prevalent in the contemporary society. Dickens was not only the first great urban novelist in England, but also one of the most important social commentators who used fiction effectively to criticize economic, social, and moral abuses in the Victorian era.

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