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**REPRESENTING DICKENS:
THE DEHUMANIZATION OF THE ENGLISH SOCIETY
DURING THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION
AS MIRRORED IN *HARD TIMES***

Abstract:

The focal point of this paper is to project the dehumanization of the mechanized English society during the Industrial Revolution as reflected in the novel *Hard Times* (1854) of Charles Dickens (1812-1870). This work will emphasize how the erosion of the morals and emotions fracture the relations between people; cordial attachment between employers and employees, teachers and students is overshadowed by the superfluity of the concrete and the material. Simultaneously, this work will portray the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution, especially on British culture and society, and with an account about early, middle and late Victorian thoughts and interests. The novel talks about a utilitarian society where man to man relationship and institutions like marriage are interpreted in terms of cash nexus and self-interest instead of human values like love and affection. The foregrounding of the mechanization of the society will also shed enough light on the importance of fancy and fiction in the life of the people of the industrial cities of England. This presentation will also touch upon such significant issues like the inhuman existence of the factory workers under the bourgeois privileged class and the role of power in educational system that was affecting the growth and development of the children during the middle nineteenth century England. The core argument of this paper is to highlight the discrepancy between the corporeal human life and the sacred human life in this universe that means one life which strictly binds by the material shackle and the other life which spreads its wings rejuvenated with the fluids of help,

morality, love and affection. The discourse of the paper will be centralized on Dickens's perspective towards the Victorian values and the good and evil of industrialization in England strongly highlighting this particular text.

Key Words: Dehumanization , Mechanisation, Industrial Revolution

Hard Times, written by Charles Dickens (1812-1870), brought out in 1854, at the initial phase of the Industrial Revolution in England, is a powerful document of the exploitative and repressive industrial system that grounded itself on the diminution and dehumanization of the factory workers as mere mechanical units of manufacture and production, without any human sentiments and emotions. *Hard Times* as a fictional genre depicts the structural principle of the class exploitation in a newly industrialized England where the very existence of the human individual was degenerated into a machine. Simultaneously the novel glanced over a utilitarian society where man to man relationship and sacred institutions like marriage were dechannelized from the proper route because of the powerful monetary force that stunted the growth of the human values like love and affection. At the same time the novel foregrounds the aftermath of industrialization that affected the growth and development of the children in the field of education. Dickens through his two chief advocates of industrial capitalism Gradgrind and Bounderby endeavours to portray a mechanized socio-economic surrounding of the middle nineteenth century England in the novel *Hard Times*.

Dickens, a social reformer, wanted to cure the social-ills of the then England in *Hard Times* where he depicted the hard moments of industrial revolution in a satiric way. *Hard Times* is a fictional piece of writing and the fictional town of Coketown is modelled on Preston/ Manchester of England which was known as the industrial hub during the middle nine-

teenth century England. The novel illustrates a society where the physical and mental mechanization of the human being is symbolized through the fictional characters. Mechanization of the society begins with school. Gradgrind:

“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 principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, Sir!” (*Hard Times* 7)

The utilitarian philosophy that Dickens criticising was due to the artist's mind's refusal to access the qualities of life in terms of quantity. As focused by Hobsbaum “However, the objections that such writers as Dickens and Carlyle had to Utilitarianism were not based on logical ground. Rather they were against the very manner of formulation. Their reaction was the very temperamental one of the artist who refuses to assess the qualities of life in terms of quantity” (175) The criticism is shown in the previously considered titles too, Dickens chose titles for *Hard Times* as *Two and Two Are Four*, *Simple Arithmetic* and *A Mere Question of Figures*.

The mechanizing impact of industrialization on the juvenile minds is powerfully depicted through the philosophy of Thomas Gradgrind and most importantly the system of addressing individual students like Sissy as ‘girl number twenty’ is a clear signifier of dehumanization. The novel foregrounds a world of calculation and market where the value of morality, love and affection began to evaporate. Here Dickens wants to point out the lacunae of the prevailing educational system of nineteenth century and the process of mechanization can be seen in the attitude of Gradgrind and the manner in which he treats his children in his school. The education system that

Gradgrind provides does not nurture any human values rather sucks the soft emotional free play from the young 'vessel's minds'. The name of Mr. McChoakumchild may evoke not only the choking of children's mind but also the sound effect of the name can evoke the image of a monster devouring the young children. It makes clear of Dickens' criticism of the educational system that is not only mechanized rather, is itself dehumanized and monstrous enough to destroy lives.

The destructive aftermath of the industrial-mechanization affected the personal as well as family level of human relationships, be it Gradgrind or Bounderby. The house of Gradgrind was as hard, factual and devoid of all sentiments as like stone itself, therefore, his house has rightly been called a 'Stone Lodge'. Thomas and Louisa, his two elder children, who were grinded to 'mathematical exactness' and were trained to be 'replete with facts' that is why they became 'so tired' of everything right from their early age and wanted something as refreshing and entertaining as stealing into the world of Sleary's circus. Because of the strict regimentation of her father it was almost impossible for Louisa to link herself with the world of excitement, wonder and curiosity. She laments to her brother Tom:

"...as I get older, and nearer growing up, I often sit wondering here, and think how unfortunate it is for me that I can't reconcile you to home better than I am able to do. I don't know what other girls know. 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."(*Hard Times* 47)

Louisa's loveless marriage to Bounderby, a person of more than double her age, and Tom utilizing the connections to his utmost advantage for which the deterioration of the

brother sister relationship took place, is a classic example of industrial bourgeois rationalism. Her father's fact oriented decision compelled Louisa to marry Bounderby which proves the devastating effects of the mechanized values on human relations. Gradgrind 'with his unbending utilitarian matter-of-fact face' hardened her daughter to accept the proposal, considering marriage as 'every other question, simply as one of tangible fact' clearly signifies the barbaric assaults of the industrial and utilitarian values on the innocent mind. The solemn institution of marriage was dehumanized to 'a manufacturing aspect' in the form of bracelets, dresses and jewellery.

Through the projection of Louisa's failure of marriage Dickens severely criticises the inflexible industrial system and foregrounds a philosophical system that privileges facts over imagination and profit over humanity as analysed by Manjeet Rathee.

The relationship that Sissy enjoys with her father working in a circus is grounded on such strong bonding of love and understanding that she does not entertain any ill will against him even after he has deserted her to some unknown destination. On the other hand people like Gradgrind and Bounderby look down upon her father as 'a runaway rogue and a vagabond'. For Sissy, love and compassion for human beings occupy the centre place, in spite of class divides; she is able to establish such a cordial relationship with Louisa and her younger sister. Here Dickens through the articulation of these characters shrewdly creates a binary between two opposite human relationships, i.e., the corporeal human relationship and the sacred human relationship.

The town was named 'Coketown' because of the production of such destructive product like 'coke', a fuel made from coal that symbolizes the endless smoke and pollution signifies both the coal industry and everything from birth to

death of the mechanized working class. The habitants of Coketown, like the students were forcefully trained in a school factory where they are made to feed nothing but all pervading 'empire' of facts. Thus the novelist set a link between the monotonous educational system and the industrial city life:

"Fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the material aspect of the town; fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the immaterial." (*Hard Times* 24)

Under the inhuman grind of facts, the existence of the factory workers reduced to mere factors of production as the body part like 'hands' turned into the parts of machine and the labour was treated as "generally a plentiful commodity". Actual motive of the master of the industry like Bounderby was to make as much profit as possible by exploiting the factory workers. The sole aim in life of Bounderby was to prevent the 'hands' of these working class people to climb upwards in the socio-economic ladder by confining them into the bleak fact oriented education. Living in his own ivory town he considers the factory work to be the 'pleasantest', 'lightest' and the 'best paid' work. The factory smoke represents the moral smoke screen that restricted these affluent mill owners from taking any notice of the miserable conditions under which the workers lived and survived but the crude fact is that it was difficult for those working class people to make revolt against their owners even as they were living in an environment of mechanization and poverty.

It was the fluid of 'enlightenment' that injected into the soul of Gradgrind by Louisa which changed him eventually. His mechanized heart was emancipated by the blessings of love and morality and he realized his mistakes in his system of education whereas Bounderby till the very last remains a typical 'Coketown man', suspicious and greedy and his dehumanizing philosophy echoes in these particular lines:

“When a man tells me anything about imaginative qualities, I always tell that man, whoever he is, that I know what he means. He means turtle-soup and venison, with a gold spoon, and that he wants to be set up with a coach and six.”(*Hard Times* 206-207)

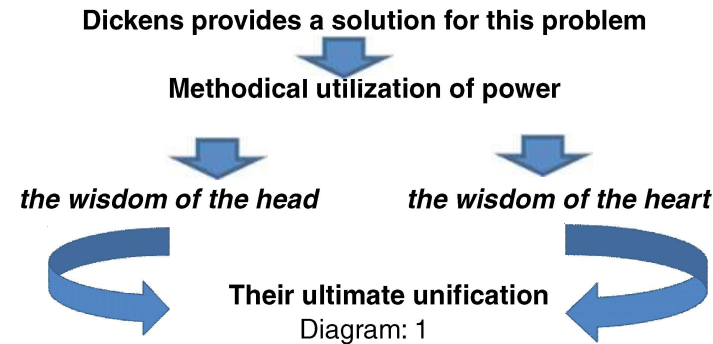
The basic principle of Coketown is ‘fact’ and that is the reason why the town lacked the principle of love, morality and affection. The aura of ‘fact’ stunted the fluidity of the moral values of human life that is why Coketown turned into a mechanized town. Dickens in this particular novel deliberately isolated his characters into two opposite poles. In the first pole the characters like Gradgrind, Bounderby and Bitzer are bound by the material shackle and the characters of the opposite pole like Sissy, Louisa, Blackpool and Rachael have spread their wings rejuvenated with the fluids of help, morality, love and affection. In this novel we can see that the route of these sacred characters were restricted by these material characters to reach to their destination. The foregrounding of the dehumanizing principle of Gradgrind’s school at the same time the mechanization of the factory workers make this novel a powerful critique of industrial England. Dickens by the delineation of such characters like Gradgrind and Sissy successively unveils two opposite principles of human life that means one life which strictly binds by the material shackle and the other life which embeds the principle of spirituality which is characterizing by the zeal of help, morality, love and affection.

The key argument of this paper is to highlight the good and evil of industrial England. The novel as a critique of the then England introduces us to the hard realities of industrialization. But if we look into this issue closely we can get a philosophical glimpse from it that means Dickens project *Hard*

Times as a satiric fiction through which he shows that industrialization in England was a blessing for mankind but it is man whose irresponsible activity and improper channelization of the industrial principles pushed the society into the jaw of destruction. Here the function of 'power' plays a significant role; that means if power goes to the authority of any wrong individual then the entire equation of society starts to deteriorate. And in this novel we can get a glimpse of such situation. By the advancement of science and technology entire mankind was blessed by the boon of Industrial Revolution where a rainbow hope glanced over the human civilization for a better future. But it was because of the mishandling of power by the person like Bounderby who just for his own benefit stabbed all other human values for which the fictional industrial city Coketown became just a town of smoke and machine. Consequently, this mechanization affected entire sphere of human life of Coketown. Not only the public life but also the private life was fractured due to the claustrophobic mechanization. Relations between people also became mechanical. Relationship between employers and employees, teachers and students turned into a heartless one. Moreover, importance of cash made sacred relations like marriage appear important in terms of self-interest. This effect of industrialization was felt in the educational field as well where scientific fact and reason became a snag for the children to channelize their mind towards innovation. The school of Gradgrind in this novel is a burning example of this fact. Dickens in this novel satirically depicted the 'mechanomorphism' of the English society and spread a message to his countrymen to rectify their faults and utilise the boon of science, i.e., Industrial Revolution for the betterment of mankind.

The manifestation of the 'factual knowledge' lays bare the aftermath of the imbalance and discrepancy between ra-

tionality and human emotion, of head and of heart. Through the projection of the pessimistic reality of Coketown Dickens endeavours to excavate the optimistic reality underneath, which means an unscrupulous channelization of power, can create a malfunction between *the wisdom of the head* and *the wisdom of the heart* but a methodical utilization of power can unify these two Wisdoms. The diagram of this analysis is given below:



As a writer with a social responsibility Dickens took his work as a platform for foregrounding his opinion on the Victorian society. The rise of scientific and philosophical thinking, challenging religion, and the emergence of printing-press shaped the public opinion that brought about the identification of the early and middle Victorian character and way of thinking. Therefore, it can be said that religion stays just an element of spiritual life, but science found its new ground of investigation for Victorian thoughts and interests. Before the Industrial Revolution, entire British society depended on religion and land but as the industrial revolution took place people's life came out of these limitations, thus Industrial Revolution became a landmark in the social history of England. The mentality of the entire industrial England was to seek the concrete and the material, based on 'fact' which is perfectly depicted in Dickens' *Hard Times* and portrayed by the histori-

cal facts that call up the idea of scientific thinking which believes in physical existence.

Victorian period lasted from 1837 to 1901. It was an age of significant mental and ethical changes and scientific developments which had been deeply rooted in the socio-economic changes of the industrial revolution. Dickens in his novel *Hard Times* has perfectly fabricated the erosion of the moral because of the material during the Victorian era which happened after the advancement of science that destroyed the religious control. Victorian thoughts and interests from early to the late Victorian period have been described by the intellectuals as a transitional era from Evangelicalism to agnosticism.

Chris Baldick in his book *In Frankenstein's Shadow* (1987), portrays the politics behind the monstrosity from the classical age and shows how the 18th and 19th century utilized this image of monstrosity as a reflection of the rising working class after the Industrial Revolution. It became a socio-economic allegorical message for the upper bourgeois class to represent the contemporary bourgeois fear of working class. So the monstrosity as a form of dehumanisation was already very popular in the literary context of Dickens but what is interesting in *Hard Times* is that Dickens does not project monstrosity in the working class rather the two monsters in *Hard Times* are Gradgrind's own productions: "the one is his son Tom, the other his unnatural protégé Bitzer" (Baldick 110). They are presented as "manufactured beings" along with the "prosperous beneficiaries" (Baldick 111) of Cocktown.

In the novel *Hard Times* Dickens portrays the effect of the whole 'system' in capitalist society where from education to private life the mechanized self-interest plays the pivotal role. The settings of school and factory lives, under which the society is, lay bare the mechanization of the human being

at the time of Industrial Revolution. Through the projection of the mechanization of the English society Dickens wants to highlight the necessity of fancy and feeling in human life which the English society lacked during the period of Industrial Revolution. Finally, it can be said that in *Hard Times* Dickens shows an urgency to create a free space for his countrymen from the 'iron regime' of a bleak industrial system which dehumanized the entire English civilization.

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