

CHARACTERISATION OF WOMEN IN CHARLES DICKENS' NOVEL "GREAT EXPECTATIONS": A MARXIST FEMINIST PERCEPTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The aim of on-going paper is to explore the miserable living conditions of women in the patriarchal Victorian social formation in England as depicted in Charles Dickens' most famous novel "Great Expectations" from a Marxist Feminist perceptive. The gender issues, concerning subjugation of women, social oppression, negligence, deprivation and humiliation can clearly be viewed in Charles Dickens' novels and even in the enforcement of social Reforms in the mid nineteenth-century Victorian England. Unfortunately, the lot of women was not improved in the era of Industrial Revolution. Charles Dickens was one the greatest masters of the art of typification and characterisation. He produced many immortal universal male and female types and characters that we meet in our everyday life everywhere and every era in the world. He produced the typical female characters in his fiction, relating the plights and predicaments of the oppressed female characters to class-differences because women played a vital role in his personal life and his fiction.

Drawing upon his personal feelings, observations and experiences of the miseries and hardships of these oppressed female figures, he realistically challenged the patriarchal values and traditions of the bourgeois patriarchal Victorian social formation, raising the status of them in his novels.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Male dominancy, Class-differences, Industrial Revolution, Gender discrimination.

INTRODUCTION

Charles Dickens, a great realist novelist, social reformer, moralist and celebrated author of the Victorian era, born in England on February 7, 1812. He was son of John Dickens, a minor clerk in the Navel Pay Office and Elizabeth Barrow. He highlighted not only the proletariat class so well but also the oppressed proletariat women characters of the patriarchal bourgeois Victorian England. He presented the realist portrayal of these oppressed figures, how they were living their lives in the male-dominated and male-centred nineteenth-century England, following the inhuman patriarchal norms, values and traditions. In these circumstances, the male oppression and violence were a daily routine. For analysing the characters women of “Great Expectations” such as Mrs Joe Gargery, Miss Havisham, Estella and Biddy from a Marxist Feminist hermeneutics, it is necessary to grasp these female characters properly in the socio-economic context of the bourgeois Victorian era that played their role in Dickens’ personal life as well as in every lifestyle.

Charles Dickens was a very sensitive and introverted kind of child since his childhood. His miserable childhood experiences imprinted far reaching and profound effects on his thoughts, art of fiction and personality. His

miseries started when his father John Dickens was imprisoned (due to his hospitality and generosity caused him financially wreck) in Marshalsea Debtor's Prison. Therefore, Dickens was compelled to quit school for earning his livelihood for his family. He joined Warren Blacking Factory as a common labouring boy and started pasting labels on bottles of shoe polish there. Basically, Dickens observed and experienced the socio-economic inequalities and socio-political injustices in the bourgeois Victorian England. He struggled against them practically and theoretically. While working in the factory, Dickens was first established an acquaintance with a family friend Elizabeth Roylance in Camden Town and started living with her. She was an old lady whom he had portrayed as Mrs Pipchin in his novel "Dombey and Son". He wanted to improve the worst conditions of poor proletariat class, like long working hours and poor wages that were the usual routine of the time. This wretched situation made him psychologically disturbed on the one hand and her mother's cruel greedy behaviour on the other. He bore the burden of his whole family when his father was in prison. As his father was released, his mother forced him to continue his factory job in order to support the family financially, neglecting his innocent feelings of childhood and requirements for schooling. This authoritative attitude of his mother shocked and injured his innocence. His father sent him to school again and after completing his school, he became a clerk in a firm. He started journalism, writing articles, stories and sketches in different newspapers and journals.

Charles Dickens fell madly in love at first glance with the daughter of a banker, Maria Beadnell, in 1830. Her rich family did not consent and give approval for their marriage on account of class-differences. She came

from upper class background so that their relationship did not materialise. Actually, Dickens was a serious suitor but he was financially weak and his father's reputation was also notorious due to his imprisonment. Consequently, their relationship tragically ended with a dire calamity after four years but he could not forget her for many years. Maria Beadnell, the adorable beloved of Dickens whom he idealised with the person of Dora, the cute heroine in "David Copperfield". As he expressed his deep passionate feelings about her that, "She had the most delightful little voice, the gayest little laugh, the pleasantest and most little ways that ever led a lost youth into hopeless slavery. She was diminutive altogether" (Dickens, C., 2000). Later on, after a few years she was physically so altered that her charming beauty was faded away. As he expresses his impressions about her in "Little Dorrit" that she was now "*spoiled and artless*" (Dickens, C., 2000). He turned to journalism, writing sketches, tales and stories in different newspapers.

Charles Dickens published "Sketches by Boz" under the pseudonym Boz in periodicals such as Monthly magazines and he was known by the name of Boz even his contemporary philosopher and founder of scientific socialism Karl Marx mentioned him in his letters as Boz. During this period, Dickens met Catherine Hogarth who was a daughter of an editor because his success and popularity succeeded to get her attention. Dickens was also attracted by her charming beauty and soon married happily with her in 1836. She gave him grace with a brood of ten children before their final separation in 1858. Subsequently, he started writing fiction and his first novel "Oliver Twist" published in 1838. Moreover, his other novels "The Life and adventures of Nicholas Nickleby", "Old Curiosity Shop", "Bamaby Rudge", "Martin Chuzzlewit" and other novels were published

one after another. When his sister-in-law Mary, seventeen years old blonde came to live with her sister, Dickens was deeply attached with her and was seriously disturbed on her sudden death in 1837. He idealised Mary as Rose Maylie in “*Oliver Twist*”. Later, he turned to theatre and performed as an actor in Wilkie Collins’ “*The Frozen Deep*” (1857) staged for the entertainment of Queen Victoria who was great admirer of Dickens’ art of fiction. During this period, Ellen Ternan, a young actress joined his theatrical company and Dickens passionately fell in love with her. After twenty two years of his marriage he maintained a relationship with Ellen Ternan and divorced his wife in 1858. Even he divorced Catherine Hogarth because he maintained a passionate but carefully hidden love affair with Ellen Ternan. He felt temperamentally unsuited to her and he was emotionally insecure and he found extraordinarily difficult to live with her. Many of his friends like Thackeray were in furious on this act of Dickens but their terms turned friendly just before Dickens’ death. He sought emotional salvation in the beauty and youthfulness of Ellen Ternan but finally, he disappointed, disenchanted and disillusioned with her. Dickens suffered a severe cerebral stroke, died on June 9, 1870 and buried at the Westminster Abbey.

Literature Review

Many books, research articles and biographies on Charles Dickens, his art of fiction and characterisation have been mentioned the women who were very important in his life and works. Moreover, a bulk of literature is available on his art of characterisation but a sprinkling of items has been written on his characterisation of women in his fiction. This research paper tends to focus on characterisation of women in Dickens’ fiction in general and in “*Great Expectations*” in particular. Therefore, the researcher

selected the four typical female characters such as Mrs Joe Gargery, Miss Havisham, Estella and Biddy as characterised in Dickens' novel "Great Expectations" for comparative study of them.

Sir John Forster wrote first biography of Charles Dickens under the title of "The Life of Dickens", 3 volumes in which he mentioned the women who played a great role in Charles Dickens' life. He was Dickens' old chum and he suppressed many real events of Dickens' personal life. For instance, he conceded that Dickens' relationship to Catherine Hogarth, served as an "illustration of grave defects" (Forster, J., 1928, Vol. II, p.147) in his character. He wished to hide the whole topic of separation of Charles Dickens with his wife Catherine Hogarth. On the contrary, Edgar Johnson, the famous American, researcher, critic and fiction writer wrote the second biography of Charles Dickens entitled "Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph" (1952 revised and abridged in 1977) in two volumes. He highlighted and brought to light the events of Charles Dickens' personal life which Sir John Forster deliberately has hidden, conceded and concealed in his biography. Likewise, Peter Ackroyd wrote "Dickens: A Biography" (London: 1990) that is an essential updated biographical work on Charles Dickens. These biographies provided great material on the relationship between Charles Dickens and women which may help us to perceive his female fictional characters, portrayed in his novels.

In addition, Michael Slater in "Dickens and Women" (London: 1983), for the first time called attention to the issue on the relationship between Charles Dickens and the women, those appeared in his life and those depicted in his novels. Judith Johnston wrote an article entitled "Women and Violence in Dickens' Great Expectations"(1992) in which he analysed

the characters of Charles Dickens' novel "Great Expectations" in a great length in the socio-historical context of the living and working ethos of women in Victorian England. D. Hawes wrote a book entitled "Who's Who in Dickens" (London: 1998) in which he generally related the real women in Charles Dickens life and their fictional forms in his works. B. Ayres wrote a book entitled "Dissenting Women in Dickens' Novels: The Subversion of Domestic Ideology" (1998) in which he discussed the female characters of Dickens and the subversion of domestic bourgeois ideology of the Victorian era. In their book "Dickens' Women" (2012), Margolyes and Fraser quote Charles Dickens' daughter remarks about Dickens' brutal and indifferent attitude towards her mother that, "My father was a very wicked man. My father was not a gentleman-he was too mixed to be a gentleman...My father did not understand women...he was not a good man but he was not a fast man but he was wonderful"(Margolyes and Fraser,2012,p.29). Taofiki Koumakpaï and Kossi Joiny Towa-Sello wrote their research article entitled "Exploring Women's Identity in Selected Charles Dickens's Works: A Re-visitation from a Contemporary African Perspective" (2016). They related the female characters of Charles Dickens to the African women on the bedrock of the feminist and neo-historicist theories. Shweta Saxena wrote her article entitled "Shifting Women from Periphery to the Centre: A Feminist Study of Charles Dickens' Great Expectations" in which she briefly discussed Dickens' art of characterisation of women in "Great Expectations" from a Feminist point of view. The study is very interesting in spite of all its limitations. She did not specify her theoretical frame work which kind of Feminism she had applied in her work. This brief survey of literature previously written on characterisation and typification of female types in Charles Dickens' novels from different theoretical and

analytical angles but no researcher still focused on the selected four female types of “Great Expectations” from Marxist Feminist perspective. Marxist Feminist theory of literature not only studies gender issues but it also relates them to class-conflicts in the given social formation. This research paper tends to analyse the realist portrayals of female characters in Charles Dickens’ selected novel “Great Expectations” and concentrates on the gender problems, relating them to class-differences in the context of the patriarchal bourgeois Victorian social formation in which Dickens wrote his debate-raging masterpiece “Great Expectations” and the scope of this article is strictly limited to it.

Debate and Discussion

Charles Dickens realistically presented the portrayal of women in his fiction. He started his career as a working lad in blacking factory at the age of twelve years. His mother was not kind to him. As his father wished Charles Dickens to go to school but she was not in favour of his schooling. She wanted him to carry on labour in the factory. Her bitter and merciless attitude towards Charles Dickens was a great cause of his disappointment, sad temperament and gloomy nature. For this reason, he had bitter feelings for her even until his death. He portrayed her in his fictional world in the person of comic and foolish wife of Nicholas Nickleby in his novel “The Life and adventures of Nicholas Nickleby” who was not sincere even with her own children. She is such type of indifferent woman as “*one who cannot see the true evil her children encounter*” (Hawes, D., 1998, p.164).

Charles Dickens like the most eminent French writers Flaubert, Balzac and other depicted female hypocrites, fallen women as well as ideal women. Some critics are of the opinion that Dickens was a gender biased

writer who portrayed the women characters as vulgar and for this reason the women readers do not take interest in Dickens novels but this charge is false against him. As he treated well his masculine characters equally in natural way, he did so with his feminine character as well. Actually, Dickens portrayed the real living conditions of women in his novels. In the Victorian era the conditions of women were not so good. The stereotypes of women in the Victorian age were totally based upon gendered biased thoughts and beliefs. The women are confined to the four walls of home and their world was confined to the kitchen. Their only role was to breed and care for children and serve to their husbands. They performed these duties in their houses. On the contrary, men enjoyed all the economic resources, possessing the whole control of fate of women. The Victorian age was basically patriarchal in nature in which women had not rite to vote. There were not educational institutes for women. Only primary education was available to them. The concept of higher education of colleges and universities was still non-existent in that age. Dickens was fully aware of these worst living and working conditions of women and he realistically delineated in his novels. However, he portrayed the female figures who have played the humanitarian and philanthropic as well as anti-humanist and misanthropic roles. He also depicted the personalities of some women of the nineteenth -century in his novels “Hard Times”, “Oliver Twist” and “Great Expectations”.

Charles Dickens was a feminist novelist fully aware of the miserable conditions of women like Frances Trollope, Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, George Eliot, Charlotte Bronte and Mrs. Elizabeth Gaskell. He as a social and critical realist novelist emphasised on women’s proper identity in terms of education. This is evidence, testifying the change that woman’s

identity has gone through during Queen Victoria reign. Besides, Charles Dickens' mother has paid her husband's debt when he was arrested. The majority of women were living in the worst conditions almost similar to little better than that of slavery undergone in the slave-owning and feudal ages. They had no other choice than serving men because in most cases men hold all the economic means as well as the women's existence. The traditional concept of women was that women should be tender, simple and responsible for domestic chores under the will and autonomous authority of men. She has only one source of livelihood that is marriage. Queen Victorian represents the bourgeois Victorian ideology, while she considers marriage as a "*great happiness*" (Abrahams, M. H., 1993, p.1540). Even Christianity also treated women as inferior to man, a second-class citizen and above all the door of sins. Dickens writes like most Victorian novelists that a woman must be "the angel of the house, devoting her life to housekeeping and child rearing" (<http://www.dickens-and-london.com/Women.htm>).

The women are depicted more peripherally in "Great Expectations" that is throwbacks to Dickens' panoramic gallery of female characters. Mrs Joe is depicted as a fallen woman in "Great Expectations" through her personality; Dickens reflected the plights and sufferings of socially marginalised women in the bourgeois Victorian social formation. As Michael Slater states that, "*His beliefs and attitudes were typical of the age in which he lived*" (Slater, M.,1983,p.301). In fact, Mrs Joe attempted to set herself free from the four walls of patriarchal enslavement. She represents fallen women of the Victorian era. Her physical appearance is not unlike her inner self. She "*.....almost always wore a coarse apron... that was stuck full of pins and needles*" (Dickens, C., 1988, p. 16). She

was totally different from ideal Victorian woman in her motherhood and wifehood. She protested against the traditional bondage of women to wear apron full of pins and needles. In this manner, she is typical embodiment of fallen woman like Little Em'ly Alice Marwood in "Dombey and Son", Martha and Endell in "David Copperfield" and Nancy in "Oliver Twist". Actually, Mrs Joe belongs to the proletariat class and on this basis she may be compared with the person of Sybil, working class heroine of Benjamin Disraeli's "Sybil". In this way, she denied all the traditional roles of women assigned by men. She adopted masculine role and became violent and aggressive woman. Mrs Joe is as much a victim of circumstances who resembles to a wicked stepmother and indifferent wife. In fact, she physically challenges her husband Mr Joe that shows miserable conditions of women who seek their emancipation and liberation from the Victorian patriarchal bondage, yoke and slavery. In fact, she underestimates the roles of domesticity, housewifery and motherhood. Likewise, Dickens also depicts Mrs. Stephen Blackpool in "Hard Times" as another character who assumes a masculine role and she lacks sign of femininity.

Mrs Joe Gargery is suffocated by the environment of the stereotype and rigid values and traditions of the time. She turns surrogate wife of Mir Joe and mother to Pip. She is the perverted kind of an archetypal despicable feminine and detestable subversive woman. Her apron fastened with pins and needles is matched with her moral conduct, harsh behaviour and fallen character, lacking of maternal love and motherly affection for Pip as Charles Dickens had been deprived of motherly love and maternal affection since his early childhood. The wretched conditions of the patriarchy shackled Mrs Joe as the impoverished, miserable wife and wretched mother. She protests against her miserable ethos in which she

lives. She wants to set free herself from miseries of impoverished and worst life. In so doing, she adopts hostility and antagonism in her burdensome and exhausted domestic chores assigned by men. Duality of her personality proves her fallen woman, a pathetic but comic figure as well. Her social status is identical to that of the other women of the era. She tries to liberate herself from oppression, tyranny and emasculation, escaping from the tiresome burden and bondage of housewifery, patriarchy and domesticity to get authority and power in her life. Charles Dickens as an anti-patriarchal feminist novelist has empathy and compassion with Mrs Joe and her plights and hardships.

The figure of Miss Havisham is drawn as a stiff-necked arrogant woman. She comes from a decadent aristocrat and newly-emerged factory owning bourgeois lady who lived in magnificently built Satis House on Gothic style, runs a brewery factory. In this respect, she came from a decadent aristocratic family background, which emerged as an industrial bourgeoisie. Dickens introduced her "*As an immensely rich and grim lady who lived in a large and dismal house barricaded against robbers, and who led a life of seclusion*"(Dickens,C.,1988,p.89). She is more than a piteous victim of the patriarchy of the bourgeois Victorian social formation. She is a perverted and distorted form of the angel in the four walls of Satis House. After having been jilted on her wedding day, she transforms into a demon, haunting not only the place she dwells but also the people surrounded her. Her deliberate confinement in Satis House, disregard of time, insistence on leaving everything to rot, including herself, and her loathing for men, reinforce her anti-masculine and misanthropic character. She concludes the tragic fate of the spinster by getting a witch-like, yet pitiful death. She is always dressed up in her bride

finery and a long white veil because Mr Compeyson, her beloved fiancé betrayed and left her on the day of wedding. Charles Dickens describes her appearance that, “*She was dressed in rich materials---satins, and lace and silks---all of white. Her shoes were white*” (Dickens, C., 1988a, p. 73). Compeyson infatuated her with false love, hollow promises and received highly precious gifts from her. He vowed to marry her but he did not fulfil his promise. Miss Havisham, with broken heart, started living a secluded life. She told Pip stating, “*What real love is. It is blind devotion, unquestioning self-humiliation, utter submission trust and belief against yourself and against the whole world, giving up your whole heart and soul to the smiter-I did!*” (Dickens, C., 1988a, Pp.425-26). Pip also became her victim. In this way, she wanted to redeem her wrong dons and sins to great extent but unfortunately, it was too late.

Scornful Estella is drawn as a young and cute girl whom Miss Havisham reared to break men’s hearts for revenging on men. She followed out Miss Havisham’s instructions of plotting to betray and hurt innumerable paramours and admirers. She was cold-blooded, manipulated and heartless girl. Estella was “*hard and haughty and capricious to the last degree...*” (Dickens, C., 1988, p. 86). She was as beautiful as “*coldly glittering distant star*” (Pickrel, P., 1960, P.166). She was also known as heart broker wanton girl who humiliated Pip to point out his common labouring and coarse position, remarking that, “*he is a common labouring-boy?*”(Dickens, C., 1988, p. 76). Estella is so hard-hearted but heartless girl who did not feel any feeling of affection and love even for Pip, her true lover. When Pip expressed his feelings of love to her, she coldly replied that, “*It seems...that there are sentiments, fancies-I don’t know how to call them-which I am not able to comprehend*”(Dickens, C., 1988,

p.643). She married a heartless, stupid brute type of man Bentley Drummle whom Jaggers branded as the spider. On this point, her life culminated at the level of dire fatal calamity. Her husband was a typical patriarchal feudal type of person who embodied from top to toe avarice, pride, meanness and brutality. He treated her with great brutality and cruelty. The mismatched matrimonial bond ended with their final separation and Estella died in an accident.

Contrary to the fictional characters of fallen women, Charles Dickens also portrayed fictional figures of ideal women in his fictional world of novels. He depicted the character Ester Summerson as an ideal woman, delineating her figure with her maternal love, mild nature, and tenderness in spite of possessing her disgraced social and class background. Similarly, the figure of Biddy is depicted as an ideal woman in Charles Dickens' novel under discussion, who is different from Mrs Joe, Miss Havisham and Estella for her gentlewomanliness, mild behaviour and humaneness. She possesses virtuous moral conduct and country-background. Like Pip, She was an orphan. She was simple, unkempt and sincere girl. Dickens describes her early girlhood that, "*...her hair always wanted brushing, her hands always wanted washing, and her shoes always wanted mending and pulling up at heel*"(Dickens, C., 1988, p.76). Later, in her grown up age in London, she remarkably changed herself. "*Her shoes came up at the heel, her hair grew bright and neat, her hands were always clean*" (Dickens, C., 1988, p.222). Pip also noticed that she was developed as a good person. When his sister was ill and bed-ridden, Biddy took care of her as well as the whole household. She put everything properly and orderly in right place and soon turned an indispensable member of the family. There is a stark contrast among the characters of

Biddy and Estella. Biddy is off as simple comparably to Miss Havisham's so-called refinement. Biddy is a good friend and real teacher of Pip in school of Wopsle's great aunt. She taught him real lesson of life, criticising mediocre type of teacher of Pip (Dickens, C., 1988a, p. 149). Comparing her with Estella, Pip also realises later that, Biddy is far better than Estella, "...*When I was clear that Biddy was immeasurably better than Estella...*" (Dickens, C., 1988, p. 152). He also describes about her that, "*She was not beautiful-----she was common, and could not be Estella-----but she was pleasant and wholesome and sweet-tempered*" (Dickens, C., 1988, p. 155). Biddy's all round-development of personality from a rugged, rough, rustic and messy schoolgirl to a self-sacrificing, sensible, affectionate and noble woman.

Dickens related gender discrimination to the class-differences, while characterising his female figures such as Mrs Joe, Miss Havisham, Estella and Biddy. In this respect, he seems to agree with Monique Wittig, the most eminent Marxist Feminist theorist, who says that, "*It remains ...for us to define our oppression in materialist terms, to say that women are a class, which is to say that the category "woman", as well as "man", is a political and economic category, not an external one ... Our first taskis thoroughly to dissociate "women" (the class within which we fight) and "woman", the myth. For "woman" does not exist for us; it is only an imaginary formation, while "women" is the product of a social relationship*" (Wittig, M., 1979).

CONCLUSION

The on-going research paper concludes that Charles Dickens was one of the greatest masters of typification of men in general and that of women in particular, summing up the whole argument in the light of Marxist Feminist lens that the Victorian social formation was male-dominated patriarchal and class-ridden one in which Dickens wrote “Great Expectations”. The selected four female figures strove against the conditions in which they lived. Mrs Joe as a fallen woman protested against gender discriminations and class-inequalities to wear apron full of needles and pins. She wanted to set herself free from patriarchal slavery and class-imprisonment. Similarly, Miss Havisham showed her hatred against male hegemony to dress up bridal clothing. She wanted to revenge on men. Estella expressed her loath for men to break their hearts, insulting, humiliating and hurting them. These three female types are true representatives of moral rottenness of the bourgeois Victorian age. In this manner, Dickens criticised the patriarchal conventions and class-relations of his age to depict such perverted type of women. Unlike these piteous female characters, he portrayed his ideal type of woman in the true, simple and virtuous person of Biddy; he wanted to see in his ideal egalitarian social formation.

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