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Plural perspectives – a Study of *Oliver Twist*

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ABSTRACT

[By analyzing the plural perspectives of Dickens as presented by him in his novel *Oliver Twist*, we are trying to study him with a new perception. His plural perspectives are apparent in three ways – in the contiguity of pain-pleasure and alienation and socialization, in the closeness of society and the individual and, finally, in the togetherness of vision and reality.]

Dickens, the chronicler of the grim life-history of *Oliver Twist*, opens the novel on a very sad note of exhaustive pain caused by social alienation and inhuman treatment. The story goes on moving from one intense dark scene to another without any sign of even a flicker of light and hope. However, Dickens is a humanist with a firm faith in human beings who squeeze the drops of joy and hope even from this intense tragedy and pain. He only believes that for this light of hope and joy to spread, the existence of pain and alienation is a pre-condition. Light shines all the more in the midst of darkness. They need one another; one without the other is unthinkable. Pain and pleasure, alienation and socialization are contiguous. This is what we call the plural perspectives of Dickens as presented in the novel *Oliver Twist*. Joy and moral enlightenment come at the end only after people pass through a microcosmic as well as macrocosmic turmoil in regular pain and alienation. Pain and alienation in the beginning and the middle of the human drama and joy, reconciliation and spiritual amelioration at the end are not scattered

and unrelated events in the drama. Here Dickens works with a vision and to understand we have to take the help of the great philosopher Nietzsche who has given us his famous dictum:

One must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star.

(Nietzsche, 129)

The dancing star of joy, togetherness and soul's piety can be created only when a man does not recoil from fear of pain, separation and vice, both within and without, only when a man really undergoes them, passes through them only to be nourished by them and, then, ultimately emerges from them a new man. To be new, he has to reconcile these opposing principles of life not only in his self but also in his social activities. If he keeps these principles alienated, separated from each other, he is doomed to failure and destruction, both at the level of the self and society. Transformation at the two levels is possible only if he undergoes both pain and loneliness unflinchingly. These have a transforming power of their own as is clear from the myth of Adam and Eve. The sin and fall are the symbols of their suffering pain and alienation. But then, through this suffering and alienation, they again achieve reconciliation with God. Man's sin and consequent alienation are thus necessary adjuncts to reconciliation. They complement one another as opposites do. But they also relate in a manner that should suggest contiguity rather than opposition. For the sake of divine creation man must have the chaos within himself. He must suffer inner and outer chaos and conflict; chaos constantly breeds or spawns the life of the humane. In Milton's *Paradise Lost*, God's design of recreation through temptation and fall is finally made explicit:

Then Heav'n and Earth renew'd shall be made

Pure to sanctity that shall receive no stain. (Book 10, 623)

There is a continual transformation of destruction into recreation, of evil into good. Toynbee analyses the paradox of God:

In the language of mythology, when one of God's creatures is tempted by the Devil, God himself is thereby given the opportunity to recreate the World . . . when once the divine equilibrium has been upset by the satanic instability, the Devil shot his bolt; and the restoration of the equilibrium on a new plan, in which God's purpose is fulfilled, is wholly within God's power. In this act of creation, which is the sole permanent and significant result of the transaction between God and the Devil, 'no demon is', or can be at 'work'. (Toynbee, 284)

Thus, in the long run,

The Devil is bound to lose the wager not because he has been cheated by God, but because he has over-reached himself. . . In his jubilation at obtaining an opportunity to ruin one of God's choicest creatures, the devil did not foresee that he would be giving God himself an opportunity to renew the whole work of creation. And so God's purpose is fulfilled through the Devil's instrumentality and the Devil's spite. (Ibid, 284 - 85)

The challenge – and – response theme operates on the level of the transformation of continuous destruction, through pain and alienation, into continuous recreation in worldly and divine joy, joy of the soul shared by all together in which there is no loneliness, no feeling of separation. It is a community of joy which is shared even by the die-hard criminals through their repentance and reform and through a complete change in their life and soul.

In a long paragraph, at the end of the novel, Dickens tries to sum up this vision of pain and joy, of alienation and socialization, together:

How Mr. Brownlow went on, from day to day, filling the mind of his adopted child with stores of knowledge, and becoming attached to him, more and more, as his nature developed itself, and showed the thriving seeds of all he wished him to become – how he traced in him new traits of his early friend, that awakened in his own bosom old remembrances, melancholy and yet sweet and soothing – how the two orphans, tried by adversity, remembered its lessons in mercy to others, and mutual love, and fervent thanks to Him who had protected and preserved them – these are all matters need not to be told. I have said that they were truly happy; and without strong affection, and humanity of heart and gratitude to that Being whose code is Mercy, and whose great attitude is Benevolence to all things that breathe, true happiness can never be attained. (350)

These lines in the novel *Oliver Twist* express, in a nutshell, all the ideas we have elaborated above with the help of great scholars regarding the contiguity of pain and pleasure, of alienation and socialization. In one breath, Dickens talks of “melancholy” which is “yet sweet and soothing”. He talks of how “the two orphans” – Oliver and Rose – are first “tried by adversity” which teaches them three virtues – (a) “lessons in mercy to others” (b) “mutual love” and (c) “fervent thanks to Him”. It is the life of pain and alienation that takes them to these three virtues in life – a source of joy and communion. And then “they were truly happy” because even in the midst of trial and tribulations, they had preserved “strong affection”, “humanity of heart” and “gratitude to that Being”. However painful the life may be, these traits of a true man, are never killed. Pain, alienation, villainy

and sin, may, temporarily, force him to suppress or forget them but at right moment and opportunity, they come out.

Nancy feels the change in her heart and enjoys it even at the cost of her life. Her woman's heart betrays her and just for a moment of true divine joy in the midst of all her pain and her inability to leave her companions, she runs to Rose to save Oliver from harm and, thus, betrays the companions:

The girl's life had been squandered in the street, and among the most noisome of the stews and dens of London, but there was something of the woman's original nature left in her still . . . (254)

The words "woman's original nature" bring before us Dickens's faith in the basic nature and humanity which is very close to that of the Bible:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him.

(Genesis, 1:27)

The "original nature" is the human nature as created by God Himself. It is uncontaminated by sin, vice, pain and alienation – all the qualities which we call negative. The original human nature is in the image of God. But in the world, under some artificial circumstances and conditions, it gets contaminated by these negative qualities. Man as God's image and likeness has his nature in the very fact of being the likeness of God, being created by Him. Sin may alter its condition, prevent its aim, and misdirect its goal, may eclipse God's image in man, but cannot annihilate this image as it cannot create man. To define human nature in terms of the fall and vice is as fallacious as the other assumption that the fall is caused by human nature, for that would amount to investing sin with a creative power equal to God's. While human nature is sinful, sinfulness is not identical with man's nature,

nor is it the principal term in the religious definition of man. This principal term is God's "likeness". The narrative of Nancy elaborates the dialectics of the divine likeness and image in man/woman and its eclipse in him/her and the possibility of its restoration within time itself. This is at the center of the life – sketch of Nancy. God has risen to help her in the figure of Rose, but Nancy is unable to extricate herself from vice and pain and alienation. And "sobbing aloud the unhappy creature turned away" (259) only to find death at the hands of Sikes. Her wish is fulfilled. Only death could give her release; her release must be a freedom from her agony and a source of joy for her soul, if not for her mundane life. Thus, the presentation of the character of Nancy in the novel has been worked out from the plural perspectives of Dickens based on and explained by theology and moral arguments of great scholars. He is not sentimentalizing vice and crime. Rather, he is presenting the truth of life. In "The Author's Preface To The third Edition" he justifies his presentation of the character of Nancy: "It is useless to discuss whether the conduct and character of the girl seems natural or unnatural, probable or improbable, right or wrong. IT IS TRUE. . . It is emphatically God's truth, for it is the truth." (xxviii) It is again in the words of Dickens, "the principle of good surviving through every adverse circumstances" (xxv) and of joy through pain and communion through alienation. Here, Dickens is not only justifying the character of Nancy but also explaining and supporting the plural perspectives which have gone in the making of the novel.

In the life of Oliver, Dickens has drawn the graph of the plural perspectives of contiguity of pain-pleasure, alienation-socialization much more prominently, clearly and intensely. For the goodness to flourish in the midst of pain and

alienation both are necessary – the inward courage with persistence of the individual and the support of the kind society:

“And oh kind Heaven!” she said folding her thin hands together, “whether it be boy or girl, raise up some friends for it in this troubled world; and take pity upon a lonely, desolate child, abandoned to its mercy!” (150)

By himself, the individual is useless and helpless, even though he is struggling hard and sincerely to protect his goodness in the midst of adversity. He is ‘lonely’, ‘desolate’ and ‘abandoned’. An alienated person is like a lamb tied to a post. However it tries, it cannot help itself in getting free. It can do it if someone takes ‘pity’ on it and shows ‘mercy’ to it. This is another facet of the plural perspectives of Dickens. Society and the individual have to join hands together to establish joy and socialization on the earth. In this respect, Oliver is very fortunate. With this companionship and community, he is able to break his alienation and loneliness. With this break, he is encouraged to adhere to his goodness and, thereby, mitigate his pain and move towards the contiguity of pain – joy. His “original nature” is protected. Naturally, joy creeps in his life. When he got communion with good people, pleasure automatically came to him; “He was still the same gentle, attached, affectionate creature that he had been when pain and suffering had wasted his strength . . .” (203)

Yet another facet of his plural perspectives is the presentation of vision and reality together in the novel. He has shown his expansiveness by including the concrete reality of life through which his vision realizes itself and works itself out in the real life. He is not simply a visionary stating his philosophy of plural perspectives but also a historian and a biographer. In the novel he says, “I am his biographer” (34) and “their historian” (347). History is a recapitulation of all the

events that have really happened in the life of a society and nation. Biography is a narration of the events that have actually happened in the life of an individual. By being both a historian and a biographer Dickens, in the novel, is trying to bring the two activities and the two entities – society and individual – together to show how the two interact together to create the contiguous pain – pleasure and alienation – communion in the life of the society and the individual. If there is pain and alienation in the life of the individual, the society is very much responsible. The individual strays into crime not voluntarily. Circumstances push him into that with natural consequence of pain and alienation. Parish workhouse managed by Mr. Bumble is the place where rogues are created. The communion, the socialization have to be provided by the society. Nancy makes this point very clear:

‘Oh, lady, lady!’ she said, clasping her hands passionately before her face, ‘if there was more like you, there would be fewer like me, - there would – there would!’ (255)

It is a wish for change, for bringing in communion between the two divided parts of the society so that there is joy.

Citations

- 1- Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, Kathleen Tillotson (ed.) O.U. P. 1982.
- 2- Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 10, P. 623.
- 3- Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra tr. W. Kaufmann: *The portable Nietzsche*, London, 1971, P.129.
- 4- Toynbee, A. J. *A Study of History*, Vol.1, O.U.P, 1935, P. 284.
- 5- The Bible, *Genesis*, 1.27.