CHAPTER – V

RELEVANCE OF DICKENS’ NOVELS IN THE CURRENT INDIAN SCENARIO

Literature is a reflection of life and even an author is the product of his socio-cultural set-up. Literary creation may be viewed in the light of socio-cultural revolutions, political changes, aesthetic activities, contemporary traditions, customs and rituals. Charles Dickens has placed his artistic creations, born out of his experience, in an ethos which reflects Victorian society. He uses the five elements to symbolise his grief over modern man’s physical and spiritual degeneration.

In *Oliver Twist*, air i.e. the nearer objective correlative to spirit is the predominant element. There is a power operating between the microcosm and macrocosm, physical and spiritual worlds. The spirit of Oliver’s mother guides him throughout the novel. The spirits subtle nature comes out through the subtle element of air. In *David Copperfield*, water and land form the backdrop of human drama. David’s association with water and his longing to be near it shows his need for spiritual exploration. He is successful in getting a comprehensive vision of the Universe. Through his constant mental exploration of *Gnana Yoga* or *Vichara*, his character is elevated. In contrast, earthbound characters like Emily are highly materialistic. In *Great Expectations*, the fire in Joe’s forge gives warmth, affection and life-giving force to Pip, whereas to Miss Havisham it brings death. Dickens makes use of water, one of the five elements, as a purifier and the symbol of the collective unconscious.

Besides being a moralist and novelist, Dickens is a great social reformer. He uses fiction as a platform for arousing social conscience against contemporary evils. His novels are a weapon for social reformation. He rails against the political, social, educational and legal drawbacks of his time. With the help of symbols, Dickens
highlights problems like water pollution, child abuse, amelioration of the miserable and pathetic conditions of poor factory workers and prisoners. He makes a silent appeal for reformation in society.

Dickens condemns the management of the work house in *Oliver Twist*. In choosing the New Poor Law of 1834 as the subject of his satire, Dickens is taking up one of the most violently disputed issues of the time. The work houses and the working conditions are deplorable, the agents are corrupt, pompous and cruel. The methods of oppression are simple: violence and starvation. Children are given a sparse diet and made to do back-breaking and strenuous work like stone-breaking, bone-crushing, oakum-picking, etc... This has psychological repercussions as well. This is shown in the picture given below.

![Image](http://www.bbc.co.uk/legacies/immig_emig/england/surrey_sussex/article_4.shtml)

Image accessed on 11 Dec 2013.

In writing about *Oliver Twist* in his “Introduction to the English Novel”, Vol I, Dr. Kettle describes the first eleven chapters as an evocation of misery and horror, a world of the most appalling poverty and ugliness, brutality and insolence in which life is cheap,
and miserable. In order to alleviate the misery of child labourers and bring them out of their pathetic state the Indian government has formed committees like Child Welfare Committee. Social evils, especially child labour is portrayed in Dickens’ novels which is prevalent even today. Oliver, Noah Claypole and Charlotte in Oliver Twist are apprentices in coffin-making.

Due to industrialization and urbanization, traditional crafts and family based economy have been destroyed and people are displaced from their land due to their increased use of machinery in agriculture. Poverty has increased and so has child labour. A large number of children are employed in agriculture sector too besides quarries and slate industries in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh and match industries in Sivakasi. This number does not include millions of children in the rural areas who are not employed individually but work with their parents in fields, as also little girls who look after their little sisters and brothers while their parents work in the fields or on construction sites in cities or as bonded labourers under contractors in big private and public sector projects. If all these are taken into consideration it will account for nearly 80% of the total population of children in the country who are deprived of the joys of childhood. Some work in saw mills, stone mines and stone crushing centers and in the ancillary units of cement factories. In all these industries fumes of metals like nickel, chromium and calcium and dust are inhaled by the children causing permanent harm to the respiratory system.

Dickens’ protagonists in his novels Oliver Twist, David Copperfield and Great Expectations also belong to this inarticulate group. Charles Lamb in his essays “Chimney Sweepers” appeals to readers to look at the chimney sweeping boys with sympathy as they might have been removed from their royal parentage. In the current scenario also the children face tremendous hardships physically, mentally, morally as well as socially, the
government is trying to alleviate their problems by passing certain laws to safeguard children’s rights. But Dickens had made his point long back.

In the novel *David Copperfield* Dickens talks about the pollution of Thames due to the industrialization in London. He says,

Slimy gaps and causeways, winding among old wooden piles, with a sickly substance clinging to the latter, like green hair, and the rags of last year’s handbills offering rewards for drowned men fluttering above high water mark, led down through the ooze and slush to the ebb tide. There was a story that one of the pits dug for the dead in the time of the Great Plague was hereabout; and a blighting influence seemed to have proceeded from it over the whole place. Or else it looked as if it had gradually decomposed into the nightmare condition, out of the overflowing of the polluted stream. (571)

Industrialisation and urbanisation have been developing at a rapid rate everywhere. These are assisted by advances in science and technology. Unfortunately, the development of industries and the growth of towns and cities have bought in its wake its attendant evil of pollution. Thus the pure Thames celebrated by the poet of ancient times is polluted by the moral sewage of the people on its shores. In the novel *Our Mutual Friend* Dickens emphasises the high pollution level of Thames and the moral degradation of the people and they are shown through the phrase “moral sewage”. The satirical illustration of the polluted River Thames, by George Cruikshank, in London on 1832 is given below.
Since ancient days, river waters have been known for their purity and divine essence. Lord Rama and Lakshmana delve deep into the river Sarayu at the end of their incarnation. The clarity of the Indian rivers is also praised in “Paripaddal” and in other Tamil Literature. But this divinity in the water is polluted by industrial wastes. Pollution brings about an adverse change in the atmosphere and also other elements by introducing into it extraneous matters. Industrial establishments on the banks of river side cities and towns dump their waste, which is then carried to the tributaries and bigger water bodies, thus creating vicious pollution.

Ganga, the holy river, a drop of which is said would revive a dying man, has not been spared either. Lord Krishna has said that among rivers, he was Ganga. Industrial effluents are directly dumped into the Ganga causing many water borne diseases and also affecting the flora and fauna. According to a paper by Mr. Som Shekhar of Bangalore University the metal pollution in the Cauvery and Kapila rivers in Karnataka is threatening the health of the people in the riverine towns. In a stretch of about 10 km on
the banks of the Cauvery a large number of people suffer from boils and acute burning sensations due to the saturation of metallic chemicals in the river water. The Cauvery receives most of the industrial wastes from Tamil Nadu. The Damodar river is polluted by the wastes from coal washeries, pulp and paper mills, steel mills and chemical industries. Major cities which are also sheltering major industrial units use rivers as dumping ground. The Yamuna river is a suitable dumping place for Delhi, Kulu river for Mumbai, Hoogly for Calcutta and Covum and Buckingham canal for Chennai. This burning problem is also found in Kerala, Gods own land. According to a study Mr. K. K. Mahajan of the Department of Environment, toxic effluents from a number of industries including chemicals, metallurgy and fertilizers flow into the Periyar, the largest river in Kerala. Same is the story with the Godavari in which, The Andhra Paper Mills alone dumps 4,500 gallons of toxic waste every day. This is also found in the case of the heavily littered Kamaraj Sagar Lake in Udhagamandalam. The Hindu publishes the pitiable situation of the river in March 21, 2014 issue.

![Fig.3 A view of heavily littered Kamaraj Sagar Lake. - PHOTO: M. SATHYAMOORTHY](image)

Print.
Many Acts and Laws have been passed to curb this rampant and life-threatening pollution. The people, local bodies and industrialists too should extend their co-operation by diverting the organic and chemical wastes from river basins to other areas. Measures taken by the British government has resulted in a pollution-free Thames. The water is a clear blue and not mixed with pollutants and wastes.

**Pollution-Free Thames**

Fig.4 [http://thamesriveradventures.co.uk/](http://thamesriveradventures.co.uk/)


In *David Copperfield*, Dickens attacks private schools which were ill-equipped and lacked black-boards, easels and maps. Good classrooms, buildings with drainage and ventilation, warmth in winter were all lacking. But due to the impact of his novels, reformation speeded up. In Tamil Nadu too, in 2013, the state government has renovated and constructed new buildings replacing the old in schools and colleges. In Dickens’ time, corporal punishment was common. The boys were beaten relentlessly for the slightest offence. Some of the teachers were devoid of humanity and ruthlessly cruel. Against these cruelties reforms were insisted upon by Dickens. In India too, the National Policy for Children 2013, states that in education, the state shall ensure no child is subjected to any physical punishment or mental harassment and promote positive engagement to impart discipline so as to provide children with a good learning experience. Students should be treated with love and care and disciplining should not take place at the cost of loss of personality. An article in *The Hindu* “Science centre to train
Government school teachers” On March, 16, 2014, shows the steps taken by the government to uplift the level of Government school teachers. Here, The Regional Science Centre at Coimbatore in Tamilnadu, which features hundreds of exhibits on various science concepts, intends to train teachers to construct models from commonly available materials. This was part of an effort to adopt ‘leaders centered’ approach in class room teaching. Recently on March 21, 2014, The Digital Equalizer programme, an initiative of the Coimbatore Corporation was implemented in all the corporation schools by the American India Foundation which has led to significant improvements in the comprehension skills of more than 8,000 students studying Standards VI to IX, and nearly 300 teachers, according to V. Alexander, Regional coordinator of the organization. This is shown in the picture given below.

Fig.5 Sairam. R “Science centre to train Govt. school teachers.” The Hindu 16 March. 2014: 7. Print.

In Great Expectations, Dickens deals with the cruelty of prison laws where people are hanged in public for committing petty offences. When Pip comes to London, he says,

As I declined the proposal on the plea of an appointment, he was so good as to take me into a yard and show me where the gallows was kept, and also where people were publicly whipped, and then he showed me the Debtor’s Door, out of
which culprits came to be hanged; heightening the interest of the dreadful portal by giving me to understand that “four on ‘em” would come out at that door the day after to-morrow at eight in the morning to be killed in a row.(190)

The cruelty in a debtor’s prison is pictured in *David Copperfield* through the case of Mr. Micawber. Eventually, the law was altered and imprisonment for debt was abolished in England. Dickens through his novels tries to change the condition of the prison which is similar to the brutality of a concentration camp, of a well-functioning prisoner mafia, of unethical practices by the medical staff, of free availability of narcotic drugs, of sex abuse by prisoners and staff alike, of extortion, blackmail, and unhygienic conditions—of anything and everything that it takes to make a hellhole on earth.

All reformation measures have one point in common—that no correctional activity is possible unless sensitivity to the human condition is developed. Kiran Bedi, the first lady IPS in India created reformation in India’s most notorious jail, Tihar. She added her human touch and introduced regular meditation (Vipasana) which changed the personality of many hardened criminals.

![Over 1000 male inmates undergoing Vipasana together](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

*Fig.6 Dangwal, Parmesh. I Dare! Kiran Bedi; A Biography. New Delhi: UBS Publishers, 1996.Print*
She believes education will work wonders and with the help of IGNOU (Indira Gandhi Open University), Tihar jail has become a study centre for prisoners. Stringent laws regarding capital punishment have also been changed.

The problems so far discussed have their root in industrialisation. Material values gain precedence over human values. Mushrooming of slums causes health problems. Villages have been eroded and in their place corrupt cities have come into being. In *Oliver Twist*, Sikes is caught by the villagers for his crime but not so in London. There he mingles with the crowd. Through his novels he portrays the cultural transformation in London life, the drastic changes that take place from an agricultural set up to an industrial one. This leads to deterioration in man-man relationships, man-nature relationships and also loss of human values. They can be regained by once again moving back to agrarian life. In rural life, people retain their individuality and distinct identity. The government also retrieves agricultural land from the clutches of industrial units. For example in the case of the Bijapur Plant according to an article “Eco Clearance of Bijapur Plant Suspended” in *The Hindu*, on March 16, 2014, The National Green Tribunal has suspended the environmental clearance to NTPC’s 2400 MW Kudgi Super Thermal Power Plant thermal power project in Bijapur, Karnataka. The Ministry does not encourage setting up of thermal power plants and other industrial units on prime agricultural land. The tribunal noted that there were various sets of evidence which showed that the land had been actually well cultivated by farmers who had several tube wells in the region for the past 40 years and had been producing crops and vegetables.

Some novels are just meant to entertain and some to reform and educate. Dickens has meant to do both, entertain and educate. His novels demand social reforms. Having experienced most of the evils personally, he wrote about them with a vivid fervour and with a personal touch. His own experiences as a child and a responsible adult are mirrored
in his novels. But it is a shame that the evils which existed then, exist even now. Social reform is the need of the hour. It is important not only to create laws but also to implement them effectively. Awareness is a prime factor and this should begin at the primary level. Thus the novels of Dickens must be prescribed at the school level and also at the college and university level.
GLOSSARY

ALAZON: A deceiving or self-deceived character in fiction, normally an object of ridicule in comedy or satire, but often the hero of a tragedy. In comedy he most frequently takes the form of a miles glorious or a pedant.

ANAGOGIC: Relating to literature as a total order of words.

APOCALYPTIC: The thematic term corresponding to “myth” in fictional literature: metaphor as pure and potentially total identification, without regard to plausibility or ordinary experience.

ARCHETYPE: A symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one’s literary experience as a whole.

DIANOIA: The meaning of a work of literature, which may be the total pattern of its symbols (literal meaning), its correlation with an external body of propositions or facts (descriptive meaning), its theme, or relation as a form of imagery to a potential commentary (formal meaning), its significance as a literary convention or genre (archetypal meaning), or its relation to total literary experience (anagogic meaning).

DISPLACEMENT: The adaptation of myth and metaphor to canons of morality or plausibility.

EIRON: A self-deprecating or unobtrusively treated character in fiction, usually an agent of the happy ending in comedy and of the catastrophe in tragedy.
ETHOS: The internal social context of a work of literature, comprising the characterization and setting of fictional literature and the relation of the author to his reader or audience in thematic literature.

HIGH MIMETIC: A mode of literature in which, as in most epics and tragedies, the central characters are above our own level of power and authority, though within the order of nature and subject to social criticism.

IMAGE: A symbol in its aspect as a formal unit of art with a natural content.

IRONIC: A mode of literature in which the characters exhibit a power of action inferior to the one assumed to be normal in the reader or audience, or in which the poet’s attitude is one of detached objectivity.

IRONY: The mythos (sense 2) of the literature concerned primarily with a “realistic” level of experience, usually taking the form of a parody or contrasting analogue to romance. Such irony may be tragic or comic in its main emphasis; when comic it is normally identical with the usual meaning of satire.

LOW MIMETIC: A mode of literature in which the characters exhibit a power of action which is roughly on our own level, as in most comedy and realistic fiction.

METAPHOR: A relation between two symbols, which may be simple juxtaposition (literal metaphor), a rhetorical statement of likeness or similarity (descriptive metaphor), an analogy of proportion among four terms (formal metaphor), an identity of an individual with its class (concrete universal or archetypal metaphor), or statement of hypothetical identity (anagogic metaphor).
MONAD: A symbol in its aspect as a center of one’s total literary experience; related to Hopkins’s term “inscape” and to Joyce’s term “epiphany”.

MYTH: A narrative in which some characters are superhuman beings who do things that “happen only in stories”; hence, a conventionalized or stylized narrative not fully adapted to plausibility or “realism”.

MYTHOS: (1) The narrative of a work of literature, considered as the grammar or order of words (literal narrative), plot or “argument” (descriptive narrative), secondary imitation of action (formal narrative), imitation of generic and recurrent action or ritual (archetypal narrative), or imitation of the total conceivable action of an omnipotent god or human society (anagogic narrative). (2) One of the four archetypal narratives, classified as comic, romantic, tragic, and ironic.

NAÏVE: Primitive or popular, in the sense given those terms of an ability to communicate in time and space more readily than other types of literature.

PHARMAKOS: The character in an ironic fiction who has the role of a scape-goat or arbitrarily chosen victim.

POINT OF EPIPHANY: An archetype presenting simultaneously an apocalyptic world and a cyclical order of nature, or sometimes the latter alone. Its usual symbols are ladders, mountains, lighthouses, islands, and towers.

ROMANTIC: (1) A fictional mode in which the chief characters live in a world of marvels (naïve romance), or in which the mood is elegiac or idyllic and hence less subject to social criticism than in the mimetic
modes. (2) The general tendency to present myth and metaphor in an idealized human form, midway between undisplaced myth and “realism”.

**SYMBO**L: Any unit of any work of literature which can be isolated for critical attention. In general usage restricted to the smaller units, such as words, phrases, images, etc.

(Taken from: Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*)