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THE PORTRAYAL OF CHILDHOOD REMINISCENCES IN THE NOVELS OF CHARLES DICKENS AND MULK RAJ ANAND

- Dara Babu

According to William Wordsworth "Child is the Father of Man" which indicates that childhood life is very much important to shape the future of children. Presenting the Protagonist’s past life is one of the major concerns in literature. Through this the readers can understand the psychological feelings and emotions of almost all the major characters in a work of art. Creative writers often dream about childhood in order to recollect it and write the same in their fictionalizing events. These childhood recollections appear autobiographical and become inevitable that such writers present these with care and commitment.

Describing Childhood, Erich Neumann has said,

What is childhood…the time of great events; the time in which the great figures are close at hand and look out from behind the corner of the house next door. The time in which the deepest symbols, of the soul are everyday realities and the world is still radiant with its innermost depth... In the childhood, there is as yet no separation between personal and supra personal, near and far, inward soul and outward world. (Art and the Creative Unconscious, P.138).

Childhood is a stage of life, associated with chronological age, located between infancy and youth and including adolescence. The word child has been used in many societies to indicate a kin relationship but also to indicate a state of servitude. But biological determinants have not always been paramount in indicating childhood. Sigmund Freud, the father of psychology, is of the notion that childhood is of key significance in the adjustment of the individual to mature well-being. Freud developed his theories of the subconscious partly through considering the reasons early childhood memory becomes lost. Since childhood was regarded as the key stage in the successful, or unsuccessful, development of ego, psychological well-being in adult life hinged in this period of time and healing might be effected through the recall of repressed childhood experience. Many disciplines came into emergence with the advent of science and technology. These fields stressed the importance of creating a healthy environment during the childhood. Before the second half of the twentieth century, physiological, psychological, and cognitive
mapping of development was the dominant theoretical model for the study of childhood. However research and theory which emerged from the disciplines of history, anthropology, and sociology came to strongly question the developmental model, shifting the focus from the child itself to the socially and culturally constructed view of childhood specific to time and place.

Charles Dickens crafted his art by giving immense scope and importance to childhood. Charles Dickens is a writer who is very sympathetic towards his child characters. “He is personally aware of the exploitation to which the children are subjected because of his own history of workhouse incarceration, which parallels Oliver’s workhouse experience” (Louis James, P.89). This explains the pathos in his novels, surrounding the uneducated and deprived orphans whose loss of childhood is echoed through their physical exploitation. Dickens’ novels ultimately petition society to protect these assailed juveniles. However, the Victorian society is paradoxical because it perceived childhood as essential, yet most of its juveniles are not given the chance to safely experience growth and transition into adulthood. Deborah Gorham states that: “...childhood had great symbolic importance, but many Victorians suffered from an uncertainty about the nature of childhood and the proper relationship of children to the structure of the family and the wider society. In the late Victorian period, many people who were concerned about the welfare of children also found themselves uncertain about how the boundaries of childhood should be defined” (The ‘Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon’ Re-Examined: Child Prostitution and the Idea of Childhood in Late Victorian England, P.355).

Like the Victorian novelist Charles Dickens, Mulk Raj Anand’s ardent advocacy for the poor downtrodden ‘underdog’ is quite patent on the very surface. The titles of his various novels are a clear pointer to the various types of exploited classes whose miseries and disabilities are highlighted in his novels. He uses all his skill in painting a more realistic, faithful and ‘true to life’ picture of these various ‘miserables’ of Indian society. He brings out the pathos and poignancy of the feelings and thoughts of his heroes and heroines, who are poor, socially, economically and people of the lowest rung of Indian society. These heroes are touched by the spirit of modern discontent and they try to revolt against the existing order. They feel pain and suffer consequences under the dead weight of useless conventions and outmoded themselves breaking down under it, bringing to the surface all
the anguish and agony of their life and expressing the fury of the novelist against the unjust social, economic, political and religious order of the day.

The theme of childhood is predominant in the novels of Charles Dickens and Mulk Raj Anand. Dickens always cherishes the memories of his childhood. And childhood always chains him, enchants him, and holds him in its magic spell. Not a single impression is left out, not a single memory is forgotten. Everything appears fresh and lively. Hence, the actuality and poignancy of these pictures of childhood always impresses upon the readers.

Charles Dickens is sympathetic and empathetic towards the children of London. Dickens presents with infinite sympathy the woe and sufferings of child life. He is primarily interested in presenting the sorrows, sufferings and privations suffered by his child-characters. The hardships borne by David Copperfield, under the tyrannical domination of Mr. Murdstone and Miss Murdstone are brought out in a touchingly tender manner. The readers are inclined to shed tears for the lot of little David as he washes bottles and suffers the pangs of penury. A similar fate falls on Oliver Twist, who again wins our sympathy for the cruel treatment meted out to him by the parish administrators and mentors of workhouses. When Oliver asks for more food and is reprimanded by the dispenser, one can feel sympathy for the poor boy. The lot of Pip in *Great Expectations* in the earlier chapters is equally touching and moves the readers to sympathy for him.

Dickens' characters are representations of the actual world as Rosenberg remarks: "...the best Dickens' characters are examples of verisimilitudinous representation" (*Character and Contradiction in Dickens*, P.147). Dickens' characters are not only representations of the world, but also reflections of existent beings, "...and assumed, by virtually all readers, to be representations of people" (P.148). Therefore, his child characters represent real children with actual experiences and backgrounds such as poverty, orphanage, neglect and deprivation of education.

Firstly, Dickens' child characters are usually orphaned or their parentage is unclear, for example Pip (*Great Expectations*), Esther (*Bleak House*), Oliver (*Oliver Twist*), Estella (*Great Expectations*) and Sissy Jupe (*Hard Times*). Estella and Esther are initially introduced as orphans, but the reader later discovers that they are actually abandoned children as is Sissy Jupe. All the three characters are adopted, for example Estella is
adopted by Miss Havisham, while Esther is adopted by John Jarndyce and lastly, Sissy is adopted by Mr. Thomas Gradgrind. The three young ladies have a common background, that of lower class parentage, yet they are adopted by middle class guardians, therefore they eventually become members of that class. Charles Dickens' seems to suggest that a lower class member can never belong to the middle class unless the elevation into that upper class is generated by the middle class. Dickens' belief is that the lower class' dependency on the middle class is inevitable. To a larger extent, he is also suggesting that it is the middle class who can change the plight of the lower class and, therefore it is their responsibility to eradicate poverty.

According to Rawlins, Dickens' Great Expectations is a way for Dickens to "dream a healthy relationship with the child within him" (Great Expectations: Dickens and the Betrayal of the Child, P.668). One can certainly see how the tragedies of his lifetime would compel him to use his gift of writing as a psychological release. As Rawlins explains, "In his last years, the demons of his childhood tear at him with increasing violence; with increasing desperation he seeks escape in self-destructive behavior" (Great Expectations: Dickens and the Betrayal of the Child, P.668). Great Expectations was one of the last novels that Dickens completed, in 1860-61. It makes sense that the middle-aged Dickens might have been looking back on his life, evaluating the good and the bad. In this novel he records clearly all the joys and sufferings that one experiences in a life-time.

Dickens' novel Great Expectations seems to cling more to reality than those by the majority of his Romantic contemporaries. Rawlins remarks: "Fantasy has traditionally been a theater where the demands of the superego can be circumvented and one's shadow be allowed to triumph." (Great Expectations: Dickens and the Betrayal of the Child, P.669). Yet Dickens' fiction is more than fantasy. The characters are more real and more tangible. This is because he really puts his own heart and soul into his characters by weaving his own experiences into his works. He also avoids delving too far into the supernatural. In Dickens and the Grown-up Child, Malcolm Andrews points out the balance between reality and fantasy that Dickens himself felt to be necessary in his work:

Dickens was always careful to indicate that, although he was a novelist with a professional interest in imaginary worlds, he was also a clear-sighted, responsible, business-like adult who knew the difference between illusion and
reality. He was aware that, without such assurance, his fiction would not be taken seriously. (P.42)

The characters in his novels are convincing because he was committed to portraying reality. It is almost as if there is a real possibility that Pip, or someone like him, actually existed. "Dickens appeals to the common experience of the reader" (Andrews, P.43). The reader is easily able to identify with the bitter-sweetness of the character's lives in his novels. In *Great Expectations*, for example, life for Pip and Estella is by no means perfect. There are no easy solutions to the problems they face, and in this way Dickens makes his characters more real to the reader.

Besides applying his own experiences in his novels, Dickens also utilized many other sources of reality in creating his characters. He made an effort to really understand the thoughts and emotions of children. He viewed children as sensitive creatures whose thoughts and feelings deserved special consideration. In one of his late letters, for instance, Dickens described the intensity of children's feelings and how adults needed to be sensitive to these feelings: "Force a child at such a time to, be Spartan with [the child], send it into the dark against its will, leave it a lonely bedroom against its will, you had better murder it" (qtd. in Collins, P.186). Dickens was very empathetic towards children. He seemed to understand their thoughts and feelings. Because he took that into consideration, it enabled him to add depth to the child characters in his novels, which made them more real to his readers. He simply applied his own mind and thought to read their status of life. He keeps his record and space in portraying the destitute children and suffering ones. He makes use of his writing attitude to bring out the attitude of children.

A thorough study of Dickens' novels reveals the importance that is attached to childhood and its joys and sorrows. Truly Dickens is a master in handling the theme of childhood and his experiences in his childhood are reflected in the novels he had written. There must be a greater volume of writing about children in Dickens than in all the other Victorian novelists put together.

Like Charles Dickens, Mulk Raj Anand is undoubtedly a champion of the poor, the lowly, and the down-trodden. It is simply because he thinks that poverty is no matter for
complacent pride. Food, clothing, and shelter are the basic needs of any human society. Starvation, disease, and unemployment are the factors which stifle the healthy growth of a nation, and so they must be removed root-and-branch. Anand also wants all this to be achieved through the resources made available by scientific and technological advancement, and not through bloodshed and war. These are the ideas of a humanist. He further says that all people must have freedom. He recognizes the importance of education as a vital social institution. He wants free primary education to be given to all children.

Mulk Raj Anand selects a particular untouchable boy, Bakha, as the central figure of Untouchable and selectively narrates certain incidents that happen to him in a day's span. He suggests that the impact they have in effecting a gradual growth of the boy's personality and in producing in him an acute awareness of his low social status and the possible ways out of the situation. The very fact that Anand has chosen an untouchable as the hero, a boy from the lowest stratum of Indian society - ignored by his predecessors as an unsuitable theme for fiction - establishes Anand's fun faith in the dignity of man irrespective of caste and social position, a doctrine central to Anand's humanism.

The character of Bakha also illustrates Anand's concept of work as worship, his belief in dignity of labour, and the importance of developing man's personality as a whole. He does his work willingly and neatly. He has unconsciously assimilated the idea of devotion to his duty. Cleaning human excreta is regarded by many as a low and dirty work. But Bakha has no inhibitions and he looks clean and sensitive in spite of his work. In fact, the hard job has made him strong and well-built.

The most important doctrine of Anand's humanism that finds clear amplification in Untouchable is, however, rejection of casteism as a cruel evil, the practice of which results in suppression of untouchables, who are denied their fundamental right to grow into respectable citizens of society. These unfortunate men are segregated from rural community, dreaded as lepers and treated most contemptuously because of the enormously useful work they do in tidying up the entire village as well as cleaning the dungpots of all castemen.

Bakha in the novel Untouchable, for instance, narrates how difficult it is for
him in spite of his most pitiful, repeated requests - to fetch a doctor to attend his dying son, simply because he is a mere untouchable, worthy of only neglect and contempt. Bakha, in fact, suffers no less. He is a fine boy-good, tender, and intelligent. But all the reward the society gives him is insult or injury, or a mixture of both. Though he is quite tired of his morning round of work of cleaning latrines, he goes out, at the instance of his father, to sweep the main road and the temple courtyard. It is, of course a welcome change for him - a change from his odorous world to a world of light and sunshine. Bakha feels elated as he proceeds towards the gates of the town which offers him a gallery of colourful things - fruit-stalls, sweet-meat stalls, betel-leaf shops, and so on. Now he stops at a shop to buy a packet of 'Red Lamp' cigarettes. He puts an anna [coin] on the board. The shopkeeper dashes some water over the coin, picks it up and throws it into the counter. Then he flings the packet of cigarettes at Bakha, "as a butcher might throw a bone to an insistent dog sniffing round the corner of his shop". (Untouchable, P.30).

Mulk Raj Anand, in the novel Untouchable, portrays another incident of Bakha's humiliation. He reaches the temple courtyard full of all manner of men and women, singing and chanting the several names of gods which he can hardly comprehend. However unable to suppress his curiosity, he goes near the temple-door and catches just a glimpse of the dark sanctuary and its idols. He is moved by the chorus of the devotees. But the next moment he is stunned to hear the priest shout: "Polluted, polluted". The whole crowd takes up the cue and starts shouting the same words. Bakha is unnerved. Anand vividly pictures what would be Bakha's predicament and reaction.

The novel Coolie is the story of Munoo, a fourteen years old hill boy, who is forced to leave his idyllic village in the Kangra Valley so that he may work and see the world. The first contact with reality shatters his dreams. Arriving in the house of a minor bank clerk, he falls foul of a shrewish and vindictive housewife, and before he flees from his employers' frenzied rage, he has relieved himself near their doorstep and thereby lowered their social prestige. He next finds himself in a primitive pickle and jam factory, hidden away among the reeking lanes and dark alleys of the feudal town of Daulatpur. The proprietor who has befriended him is bankrupt by the thievery of his partner and hurled back into the ranks of the labourers from where he had sought to rise. Out on the streets again, Munoo becomes a coolie, facing desperate competition from other coolies for a
Both Charles Dickens and Mulk Raj Anand trace the life of children by mixing their childhood in their respective novels, having children as prime characters. Though the concentration of Charles Dickens is all type of children, Mulk Raj Anand cares for the downtrodden alone. The children in Charles Dickens' novels are destitutes, orphans, and left outs but Mulk Raj Anand's children in his novels are untouchable and downtrodden. Children are instinctive having strong imagination. They have both a sensitive and sensational nature. Charles Dickens children see life with no logic or philosophy. They view it blindly and passionately with curiosity and suspense. This shows that Charles Dickens has a thorough understanding of children.

The child characters of both the writers have left an indelible impression on the minds of the readers. Charles Dickens' children are the victims of industrialization whereas Mulk Raj Anand's children are the victims of both imperialism and casteism. No writer's child is born with silver spoon in his mouth. So they faced a lot of humiliation and suffering during their childhood which in disguise has helped them to understand what life is and to face it boldly.

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