

## ORWELL'S DOWN AND OUT IN PARIS AND LONDON (1933) : A DOCUMENTARY ON HUNGER, STARVATION AND POVERTY

**Dr. N. R. SAWANT**

Associate Professor &  
Head, Dept. of English,  
Shivraj College, Gadhinglaj.

George Orwell (Eric Arthur Blair 1903-1950) was the social rebel, ardent liberal who personally experienced the pangs of the down trodden and aspired for common decency embedded in Democratic and Ethical Socialism, is now acknowledged as one of the most significant writers of twentieth century. Even after sixty one years of his death, his works are running into numerous editions and are translated into nearly more than sixty languages of the world which has entitled him as a 'World figure'. Film adaptations of his novels like *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty Four* as well as television version of his novels like *Coming Up For Air* and *Keep The Aspidistra Flying* have brought his works before a vast audience.

Orwell's first work (*Down and Out in (Paris and London (1933)*) is a Documentary Novel. Jenni Calder clearly points out the documentary nature of Orwell's early novels including *Down and Out in Paris and London* thus : " We cannot read these novels as political novels. They are novels about class, and they are documentaries. In many respects their picture of contemporary Britain is devastatingly accurate, and although politics do not feature in them the tone of Orwell's description is as fiercely committed as the tone of documentary in *Down and Out or Wigan Pier*"<sup>1</sup>. David Wykes mentions that Orwell's Novels such as *Down and Out in Paris and London, The Road to Wigan Pier and Homage to Catalonia* are called as : "*Documentaries*"<sup>8</sup>

Richard I. Smyer also shows documentary aspect of the novel : "Orwell's first book certainly exhibits some of the characteristics of a documentary. Implicit in Orwell's circumstantially detailed account of his experiences among French workers and English tramps is the disturbing truth that below the comfortable world of middle class life exists a shadowy republic of the poor and oppressed.

In the words of Martin Gray the adjective documentary can be applied to : "Any play or novel based on documents of various kinds, which attempts therefore a reconstruction of an event in an exact historical rather than imaginative manner. The author will, of course, provide his own interpretation of events and may be forced by gaps in the documentary evidence into invention"<sup>3</sup> Alastair Fowler mentions : "Factional or Documentary Novel"<sup>2</sup> as one of the subgenres of novel.

The novel has two distinct parts. Orwell as a narrator is omnipresent in the novel. The first part deals with Orwell's time in Paris in the late twenties and it describes his experience of poverty starvation and his subsequent job as a plongeur or scullion first in the kitchens of a very large hotel and then in a fashionable restaurant. The second part of the book deals with his continuing poverty upon his return to England and his experiences living among down and outs in and around London. First twenty three chapters are devoted to 'Paris Section' and the remaining fifteen chapters to ' London Section'. Both sections are logically and spatially juxtaposed with the thread of poverty and starvation. The characters such as Charlie and Boris dominate the Paris section and Paddy and Bozo dominate the London section. In the documentation of hunger, starvation and poverty in Paris Section, three stories are told by Charlie and one by Valenti. Charlie's first sadistic love story with a peasant

girl (chapter II), his humorous still pathetic story of starvation with a girl named Yvonne (chapter 18) , and his third story of Old Roucolle, the miser (chapter 23) and Valenti's story of starvation (chapter 15), clearly show documentary nature of the novel. Orwell, the narrator of the novel observes , explores and participates in the slum life of Paris and East End of London. He documents his observation and explorations minutely. Hence the novel is basically a documentary.

At the outset of the novel, Orwell takes the readers to his world of down and out by his brisk documentation of the rue du Coq d'Or, the Parisian slum which he describes thus : It was a very narrow street , a ravine of tall leprous houses, lurching towards one another in queer attitudes, as though they had all been frozen in the act of collapse. All the houses were hotels. On Saturday nights about a third of the male population of the quarter was drunk. There was fighting over women. It was fairly rackety place. It was quite a representative Paris slum".<sup>4</sup> This sprightly naturalistic documentation takes us directly into the very spirit of the penury world of the novel. The lodgers with whom the narrator stayed were of every trade cobblers, bricklayers, stonemasons, navies, students, prostitutes, rig-pickers. The first chapter thus serves as an exposition to the story of poverty.

Hereafter starts the documentation of narrator's hunger, starvation and poverty. Day after day, the narrator's money began to ooze out as he was staying in the room of hotel 'Des trois Moineux' as a lodger in slum area. Day after day he was forced to strave and pawn his clothes. Then he thought it absolutely necessary to find out work and remembered a friend of his, a Russian waiter named, Boris who might be able to help him.

Both Borish and the narrator set their journey on to get a livelihood. They pawned all their belongings and nothing was left to fall back on. Days were passing without a grain of food to eat. They had gone from street to street and from hotel to hotel to get a job but in vain. The narrator was too lazy to do anything but lie in bed. His description of experience of hunger is very effective : "Hunger reduces one to an utterly spineless, brainless condition, more like the after effects of influenza than anything else. It is as though one had been turned into a jellyfish, or as though all one's blood had been pumped out and luke-warm water substituted. Complete inertia is my chief memory of hunger."<sup>5</sup>

One day the luck changed abruptly and Boris got a job at the hotel near the place de la Concorde five hundred francs, a month and food. The narrator also got a job of a plongeur in the Hotel which was a vast grandiose place. He had to go to the kitchen which was a stiflingly low ceilinged inferno of a celler, red lit from the fires, and deafening with oaths and the clanging of pots and pans. The narrator thus takes us to the subterranean place of the working class world of the Parisian hotels and to the kitchens where the workers had to burn their body to fill the stomach. The narrator also worked as a scullion in the cafeteria of Hotel X in the hot temperature of about 110 degrees fahrenheit.

The story of Valenti, a waiter in chapter fifteen, who had not eaten for five days even a crust of bread, is grim documentation of hunger, starvation and proverty. Valenti was living in a dirty cheap little hotel in the Rue Sainte Elosie up in the Latin quarter. The hotel was called Suzanne May, after some famous prostitute of the time of the Empire. Valenti was starving and there was nothing he could do. All he could do was to lie in the bed getting weaker and weaker, and watching the bugs running about the ceiling. In the afternoon of the fifth day he went half mad. He saw a picture of a woman hanging on the wall and thought that it would be of Sainte Eloise, the patron saint of the quarter. Though he was an atheist, he knelt before her picture,

prayed and requested her to give him food, then he would burn a candle for her at her church down the street. Then within five minutes a big fat peasant girl called Maria, who lived at his hotel, came to his room. She saw his most wretched condition and was horrified to learn that he had eaten nothing for five days. Valenti told her that he had nothing to pawn and get money. But unexpectedly she saw an empty oil bidon for which he had paid three francs fifty as deposit. Immediately, he ordered Maria to be quick. Instantly, within three minutes Maria returned with two pounds of bread under one arm and a half litre of wine under the other. Then Valenti describes the heavenly joy of getting food after five days of starvation and says : “I didn't stop to thank her ; I just seized the bread and sank my teeth in it. Have you noticed how bread tastes when you have been hungry for a long time? Cold, wet, doughy like putty almost. But Jesus Christ, how good it was! As for the wine, I sucked it all down in one draught, and it seemed to go straight into my veins and flow round my body like new blood. Ah, that made a difference! I wolfed the whole two pounds of bread without stopping to take breath.”<sup>6</sup> After wolfing the food, Valenti remembered that he had to burn a candle in the church of Sainte Eloise as he had promised her. But to his amazement, he found that the picture before whom he had knelt and prayed was not that of Sainte Eloise-the Patron Saint of the quarter but that of Suzanne May, the famous prostitute of the Empire !

Charlie's story of starvation with a girl named Yvonne, told in chapter eighteen is humorous still pathetic. His third story told in chapter twenty three is that of Old Roucolle, the miser. He died of a broken heart due to the treachery of the Jew. His story is pathetic, melodramatic but still touching. Old Roucolle's story concludes the first part of the novel. The first story told by Charlie is stereotyped and the second is character revealing. The third story can be read as a parable that of miserliness leads to misery. The third story of Valenti is touching but still humorous. These four main stories are fitted in the documentation of hunger, starvation and poverty rampant in Parisian slums. They add documentary flavour to the novel.

On the whole the Parisian episodes are written with enthusiasm and light heartedness. They are rather episodic, while London chapters are of picaresque nature. The London chapters by contrast, are marked by a drabness and tedium, which, despite the liveliness of writing, suffuses the final portion of the novel with rather a grey quality. There is unmistakable difference in tone between two sections. The Parisian section of the novel is more episodic than the London section. It documents the writer's experience of hunger and that of other characters such as Charlie, Boris and Valenti. The documentation is apt to point out the theme of hunger, starvation and poverty.

In the Second Part of the novel, London Section, the documentary aspect is dominant in chapter twenty seven and thirty five. Orwell's essay *The Spike* (1931) is a description of a week end's stay in a casual ward which was later on revised to form chapters twenty seven and thirty five of *Down and Out in (Paris and London)* . It is visible that while structuring the first novel, Orwell has mostly relied on the genre of documentary as he aspired to project the social realities or the worst conditions prevailing among Parisian and London poors of his times.

**Works Cited :**

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