

The Road To Wigan Pier: Labyrinth Of Poverty

Dr. N R Sawant

George Orwell was the social rebel, and the ardent liberal. He personally experienced the pangs of the downtrodden. He toiled his whole life and career for their emancipation from their oppressors. He used his talent against injustice and totalitarianism. He aspired for common decency embedded in Democratic and Ethical Socialism. He is acknowledged as one of the most significant writers of the twentieth century. Even after forty seven 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.

The Road to Wigan Pier (1937) is a landmark in George Orwell's career as a novelist. In 1946 he wrote : "Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism as I understood it. But I could not do the work of writing a book, or even a long magazine article if it were not also an aesthetic experience." (Orwell 1976, p. 28). It is discernible that whatever the views, opinions Orwell has expressed, he has put forth them in a proper artistic form and with an aesthetic concern. Even present work *The Road to Wigan Pier* is concerned to recreate the experience of an atmosphere than to communicate or classify a mass of carefully collected data.

In January 1936 Orwell was commissioned by Victor Gollancz to make a study of unemployment in the depressed areas of the north of England and to write about what he had seen. Orwell accepted the offer at once and embarked on a tour of North of England, Lancashire and Yorkshire and was there from 31 January 1936 to March 1936. Travelling partly on foot and partly by public transport his journey took him to Coventry, Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Macclesfield, Manchester, Wigan, Liverpool, Sheffield, Leeds and Barnsley. Throughout this period he met miners, trade union officials, officials of the National Unemployed Worker's Movement and others in an attempt to study housing conditions and to see for himself the effects of poverty, malnutrition and unemployment on the lives of ordinary people. He recorded his impressions in a diary which is published in the Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters. This diary, vivid and moving in its sincerity, formed the basis of the novel which became *The Road to Wigan Pier*. In this novel Orwell has transformed his immediate day-to-day impressions into a social document of enduring worth. It is a piece of reportage which is now acknowledged as a classic of the genre and as one of the seminal works. It is the work of a man who was seeing a landscape and people from a completely fresh standpoint, without inside knowledge and without prejudices. The result is a work of passionate, almost painful honesty.

It can be said that the title of Orwell's novel is a variation of Kipling's *The Road to Mandalay*. The title is suggestive and the road to Wigan is road back from Mandalay with the full implications of guilt and penitence. It is a re-writing of personal history in such a way as to conform both the release from existential nausea and the possibility of restoring emotional balance and integrity.

The novel is divided into two parts almost equal in length. The first part contains seven chapters which describes social conditions amongst the miners, and the unemployed of Lancashire and Yorkshire and their mighty manual work in the mines. The second part contains six chapters and is a long autobiographical statement of Orwell's approach to socialism, his attitude to the vexed

question of class. First part of *The Road to Wigan Pier* containing seven chapters is obviously documentary in nature.

Out of the seven documentaries, the first two are delightful examples of Orwell's amused eye resting upon people and their surrounding and of his power in describing what he saw in prose as clear as a window pane. His documentary power seems to be superb. The opening chapter is written in a very different style from the remainder of the book. In tone it resembles the opening section of a novel. There is no preface or introductory statement explaining the origins of a book. Instead, the reader is allowed to take a plunge immediately into a northern industrial milieu. The novel is remarkable for its extraordinary vividness.

The picture of Mr. Brooker's lodging house in the first chapter is documented in such a skillful way that the documentation creates vocal and verbal pictures in the minds of the readers. Orwell sketches the comic portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Brooker who kept the lodging house and a tripe shop along with it.

The second documentary takes us to the very core of the mine and miner's life which is like inferno. It describes a descent into a coal mine. It is a remarkable piece of writing, executed with a kind of unemotional honesty which Orwell rarely equalled. Orwell visited three mines-one at Wigan and two at Barnsley-but it was the impact of the Wigan experience-Crippen's mine which he found so memorable. Orwell's technique is to describe as simply and matter of fact as possible the experience of journeying into the mine as it happened to him. In a series of striking images, he evokes the descent into the coal mine, the painful walking to the coal face, the heat and noise, the sheer physical drudgery in cramped and dangerous conditions. The chapter has force and vigour, so the feel of the mine is ineradicably communicated. Hence for its picturesque documentation, the chapter has been separately published as '*Down the Mine*'.

In contrast to the description of slack dereliction of the opening chapter, the documentation of miner's picture toiling at the coal face is brilliant one. It pulsates with the new zeal after witnessing the stupendous work of the miners. The second chapter takes us to the interior of the work in the mine. One feels that the mine is like hell. The narrator feels that most of the things one imagines in hell are there heat, noise, confusion, darkness, foul air, and above all, unbearably cramped space. The fillers do the super human job. They look as though their bodies are made up of iron. The narrator documents the stupendous work of the miners deftly : "But the fillers look and work as though they were made of iron. They really do look like iron-hammer, iron statues-under the smooth coat of coal dust which clings to them from head to foot. But nearly all of them have the noblest bodies; wide shoulders tapering to slender supple waists, and small pronounced buttocks and sinew thigh, with not an ounce of waste flesh anywhere. You can never forget the spectacle once you have seen it - the line of bowed, kneeling figures, sooty black all over, driving their huge shovels under the coal with stupendous force and speed" (Orwell 1937 p. 21). There is danger at every step to the life of a miner of the explosion of the poisonous gas, of falling of the roof. This documentation of an electrically-driven coal cutter, running horizontally instead of vertically, with teeth, a couple of inches long is also superb. The narrator feels that miner's world is a different universe.

Third chapter describes the miner's life, pithead baths, housing, budgets, accidents and his diseases. There follows a series of chapters concerning housing, malnutrition and social conditions in the depressed areas. Throughout these chapters Orwell is not content merely to describe poverty, mining and the social consequences of unemployment and poor housing, but seeks at each stage of his exposition to arouse the anger and engage the emotions of the readers. Moreover, his approach

throughout is one of compassion and a deep sense of outrage at the affront to human decency represented by squalid housing, poverty and malnutrition.

The fifth chapter realistically portrays the effects of unemployment. Orwell states that more than one out of three of total population of England was living on dole at that time. Life on dole created a frightful feeling of impotence and despair which was almost the worst evil of unemployment, far worse than any hardship, worse than the demoralization of enforced idleness and any less bad than physical degeneracy. Sixth Chapter describes the diet of the industrial workers, employed or unemployed and the people's pitiable scramble for coal on slag-heap and the undernourishment resulted in physical degeneracy of the workers. Even the death rate and infant mortality of the poorest quarters were always about double those of the well-to-do-residential quarters. Orwell's dreary picture of unemployed people scrambling on a slag-heap for burnable fuel or coal is pathetic where the people like fleas swarm on the waste coal to find out a tiny part of coal. Seventh Chapter describes the North-South Antithesis wherein Northern part of England is described as superior to South.

Thus the first part of *The Road to Wigan Pier* realistically documents the filthiness in the industrial towns of North, the interiors of coal mine, pocky houses of workers, the physical and psychological effects of unemployment, the diet of the unemployed and the ugliness of the industrial north along with a comment on the North-South rivalry. Orwell did not merely visit miner's homes, he actually lived in them, he did not merely gain information concerning housing and nutrition, he experienced these things at first hand. It is this quality which illuminates the Wigan Chapters with such a strong sense of immediacy.

Chapter Eight shows the significant issue of class difference which has its roots in Orwell's childhood days. In this chapter Orwell tells us how the issue of class difference was inculcated in him by his middle class relations. Orwell feels that the snobbish middle class and upper middle class people sow the seeds of class difference in their early stage of life. Chapter Nine of *The Road of Wigan Pier*, contains segments of autobiography. Early in his school days Orwell had a feeling of disgust against the rich, particularly those hoggish people who had become rich within short time. This was his step towards formation of an ardent revolutionary and socialist as he considered himself at his age of seventeen. At the age of twenty, Orwell went to Burma to join the Indian Imperial Police. After the tormenting experience, Orwell found that he was in the police, which mean he was a part of the actual machinery of despotism. Moreover, in the police, he saw the dirty work of empire at close quarters. He was ashamed and disgusted of himself as he saw the worst phase of British Imperialism of which he was an inseparable part. His conscience did not allow him to retain his position as a Police officer in Burma and to be a part and parcel of evil despotism of British Imperialism. He expresses the prick to his conscience, a weight of guilt that tortured him. He explains: "When I came home on leave in 1927 I was already half determined to throw up my job, and one sniff of English air decided me. I was not going back to be a part of that evil despotism. For five years I had been part of an oppressive system, and it had left me with a bad conscience. Innumerable remembered faces-faces of prisoners in the dock, of men waiting in the condemned cells, of subordinates I had bullied and aged peasants I had snubbed, of servants and coolies I had hit with my fist in moments of rage haunted me intolerably. I was conscious of an immense weight of guilt that I had got to expiate" (Orwell 1937, p. 129).

Hence to expiate himself from the guilt of serving in an unjust British Imperialism in Burma, Orwell turned immediately towards the extreme cases, the social outcast: tramps beggars, criminals, prostitutes to whom he considered the 'Lowest of the low' and with whom he wanted to get in contact. He desired to see what their lives were like and wanted himself to be part of their

world. Orwell's detour of North of England was also motivated to see the life of lower classes of people and to have a peep into the labyrinth of poverty so that the so called elite -the people of high class of society should think sympathetically about the worst condition of poor people and should bring reform in their lives. It can safely be said that the genesis of reforms in the life of poor classes of people seems to be in the efforts of intellectuals like Orwell who tried to change not only the lives of poor people but also tried to give a new direction to the outlook of elite people by taking them into the labyrinth of world of poor people wherein lies the complex structure of their individual, social, cultural, political and national life and who continue their rigmarole due to lack of conducive infrastructure.

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