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Ecocultural Ethics in *Hard Times*

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Abstract:

Dickens has done a great service to ecocriticism without knowing it, in his novel, *Hard Times*. He is greatly disturbed to see the incalculable damage done to nature in the name of industrialization. Industrialization causes not only ecological but also moral and spiritual damage. He projects an imaginary industrial town, Coketown which looks ugly and the canals and rivers of Coketown are black and ill-smelling. It has an adverse effect on the physical, mental and moral health of its inhabitants. The novel has a serious message teaching ecocultural ethics to mankind.

Keywords: ecocultural, ethics, anthropocentric, non-human, representations, anthropomorphism

Scarcely did Charles Dickens know in 1854 when *Hard Times* was published that he was doing a great service to ecocritical studies. It moves to appropriate the rhetoric of environmentalism in literature while looking at the effects such discourses have on culture.

It is interesting to note that in ecocritical studies, the focus of the study has changed. Where a traditional reading is usually anthropocentric, in an ecocritical perusal what would usually be viewed as merely background becomes an active player in the working out of a narrative. Nature becomes so dynamic that it tells upon the life and culture of individuals.

The term 'ecocriticism' came into being when William Rueckert wrote an essay, 'Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism' in 1978. However, the credit goes to Cheryll Glotfelty for the revival of this term in a conference of Western Literature Association in 1989 in USA. She urged to adopt this term to the diffuse critical field that had previously been known as 'the study of nature writing'.' (Barry 240)

In 'Introduction' to *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) Cheryll Glotfelty explains ecocriticism in the following terms:

"What ... is ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender - conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies.'(XIX)

The mission of ecocritics is the celebration of nature and they aim at cultural analyses explicitly to a 'green' moral and political agenda. There is a close relationship between ecocriticism and environmentally oriented development in philosophy and political theory.

In *Writing the Environment* (1998), Richard Kerridge offers to suggest a broad cultural ecocriticism. He looks at it as responses to environmental crisis:

“The ecocritics wants to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear, to see more clearly a debate which seems to be taking place, often part-concealed, in a great many culture spaces. Most of all, ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses environmental crisis.”(5)

Greg Garrard puts forward his own understanding of ecocriticism by saying,

“Indeed, the widest definition of the subject of criticism is the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term ‘human’ itself.”(5)

Three key-words - ‘human’, ‘inhuman’ and ‘non-human’ form the nucleus of ecocriticism .They come together to a serious concern to preserve and protect the ‘non-human’ world. Ecocritics may not be qualified to contribute to the debates with regard to problems in ecology, but it is obligatory on their part to transgress disciplinary boundaries and develop their own ‘ecological literary’ as far as possible.

Cheryll Glotfelty finds similarity between the development of ecocriticism and “that of feminist criticism whose readers turned their attention to minor characters and forgotten texts in an effort to find new perspective about the portrayal of women in literature”.(Dobie 242). Ecocriticism begins with an interest in ‘representations’, an examination of how nature is depicted in literature, how it is simply ignored by considering a particular aspects of nature such as a river or a mountain or wilderness as a non-entity. The second phase aims at making an endeavour to rediscover and reconsider the genre of nature writing which had been neglected. The third stage is the theoretical one which draws upon science, history and philosophy to ask a wide range of questions about such topics as the consequences of anthropomorphism, the relation of nature and culture etc.

Judging *Hard Times* on ecocritical canons, one wonders how it weaves a discourse of ecocultural ethics. Dickens is immensely disturbed to see how nature is treated and the incalculable damage is done to ecology. It is not only a forecast of hard times ahead, but also a proved one through Gradgrindian narrative that hard times has already begun. Neglect of nature and move towards industrialization is causing not only ecological but also serious moral and spiritual damage.

Dickens uses images such as ‘savage’, ‘serpents’ and ‘elephants’ to show the attitude of mankind towards nature. These images are highly suggestive of anthropomorphism. The novelist, presenting a picture of Coketown, laments:

“It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it....” (18)

Coketown did not look natural. It had an ugly look. The ‘serpents of smoke’ hung over the town making life miserable:

“...it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys out of which

interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever and never got uncoiled.”(18)

Water is a source of life, but the very source of life is contaminated. Coketown ‘had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye....’(18) Industrialization instilled in man a kind of ‘melancholy madness’. The novelist beautifully presents a negative picture of Coketown:

“...where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness.”(18)

Man is acting like a machine, ‘the piston of the steam-engine’ and moving ahead like the head of a mad elephant destroying its own habitat. This imagery is very powerful.

This anthropomorphism is polluting the mind and psyche of individuals in *Hard Times*. Instead of following ecocultural ethics, they believe in utilitarian ethics which has an adverse effect. The entire novel is dipped in utilitarian culture. There is total disregard of nature. Gradgrind is holding high the flag of utilitarianism.

Frederick Brereton comments on the deteriorating culture of Victorian era when the novel came out, “It was essentially a period when culture was at a discount; when all that mattered was the insensate lust for wealth and still more wealth” (II) In the pursuit of ‘wealth and still more wealth’, Gradgrind was imparting an otherwise education not only to his children but also to the entire society. The school where he teaches ‘facts’ to the children along with M’Choakumchild and other teachers is symbolical of the entire society which has deviated from the culture.

Gradgrind’s two children, Louisa and Tom are kept from nature and its reformative and replenishing mission. Unlike Wordsworth whose Lucy grew ‘three years in sun and shower’ and then nature adopted it to train, these children were never allowed to go closer to nature, they did never have a taste of it. This is nothing but ‘Murdering the Innocents’. (2) Dickens writes,

“No little Gradgrind had ever seen a face in the moon; it was up in the moon before it could speak distinctly. No little Gradgrind had ever learnt the silly jingle, Twinkle, Twinkle, little star; how I wonder what you are!” (7)

The little Gradgrinds were kept aloof from the soothing effect of moon and wondering effect of ‘star’. They were kept busy with studies in confinement.

“No little Gradgrind had ever known wonder on the subject, each little Gradgrind having at five years old dissected the Great Bear like a Professor Owen and driven Charles’s Wain like a locomotive engine driver. No little Gradgrind had ever associated a cow in a field with famous cow with the crumpled horn who tossed the dog who worried the cat who killed the rat who ate the malt or with that yet more famous cow who swallowed TomThumb: it had never heard of those celebrities....”(7)

The teacher M'Choakumchild had mastery over choking the children with facts and nourishing the utilitarian crop. Gradgrind was a great grinding machine who never allowed the children to be sentimental and fanciful. Dickens writes,

“Herein lay the spring of the mechanical art and mystery of educating the reason without stooping to the cultivation of the sentiments and affections. Never wonder. By means of addition, subtraction, multiplication and division, settle everything somehow, and never wonder. Bring to me, says M'Choakumchild, yonder baby just able to walk and I will engage that it shall never wonder.” (40)

Tom and Louisa were in total confinement, not exposed to nature for learning purposes. They had all the facilities at home.

“The little Gradgrinds had cabinets in various departments of science too. They had a little conchological cabinet and a little metallurgical cabinet and a little mineralogical cabinet; and the specimens were all arranged and labelled and the bits of stone and ore looked as though they might have been broken from the parent substances by those tremendously hard instruments their own names....” (8)

The children were not considered as human beings but as machines. And since the seeds of utilitarianism were sown in their childhood, they could not grow well, their all round development was obstructed. Louisa and Tom had to suffer a lot.

Louisa is a faithful and obedient daughter. It is owing to the influences of her father, Gradgrind that she gives importance to reason and head in place of emotion and heart. She suppresses herself for the sake of her father. She marries Mr. Bounderby, the man she hates just for the sake of her brother and her father's insistence to live a life based on facts. Once when Bounderby had planted a kiss on Louisa's cheek during her childhood days, she reacted violently by ‘rubbing the cheek he had kissed , with her handkerchief, until it was burning red.’ (17) She said to Tom, ‘You may cut the piece out with your penknife if you like..., I wouldn't cry!’(17)

The father being' an immensely practical man' never wanted to know from Louisa about her natural choice. Bounderby was imposed upon her even though he was more than twice her age. This was also against nature with regard to the selection of her spouse. The father comments:

“You are, we will say in round numbers, twenty years of age; Mr. Bounderby is, we will say in round numbers, fifty. There is some disparity in you respective years, but in your means and positions there is none; on the contrary, there is a great suitability.” (81)

There is a long conversation between Gradgrind and Louisa. Louisa is satirical, but Gradgrind hardly understands. The following words are satirical of father:

“You have been so careful of me, that I never had a child's heart. You have trained me so well, that I never dreamed a child's dream. You have dealt so wisely with me, father, from cradle to this hour, that I never had a child's belief or a child's fear.” (84)

Gradgrind takes these words for his success and proceeds for the marriage. Sissy finds this decision horrible. The novelist writes,

“When Mr. Gradgrind had presented Mrs. Bounderby, Sissy suddenly turned her head, and looks, in wonder, in pity, in sorrow, in doubt, in a multitude of emotions, towards Louisa.” (86)

Louisa remains virtually a prisoner in Bounderby’s house. Her behaviour there is rather baffling. She is a strange combination of melancholy, dignity and self-possession. She does not care to please or flatter Bounderby whom she finds more or less impossible. She has developed an indifference to life. In short, it can be said that it was not a happy marriage. In course of time, Louisa feels attracted towards Harthouse because of his smooth manners and his assumed honesty in dishonesty. She feels somewhat drawn towards him because he speaks like a man who seems to be free from all kinds of pretensions and hypocrisy. Then she feels drawn towards him because he seems to take a lot of interest in her brother for whom she has undoubtedly a soft corner. She is not clever enough to see through the kind of strategy Harthouse is employing in order to win her heart. Probably, the strongest reason why she feels drawn towards him is that she is leading a loveless life, having been yoked to a husband who was thrust upon her. However, she is not able to decide whether to marry Harthouse or not. For this she looks towards her father, seeks his help and guidance in this critical situation. This is what utilitarianism has done to man. Louisa feels handicapped in decision-making. It is obvious the life of Louisa is miserable. The readers feel pity for her.

Tom is sullen and sulky. He is an example how one’s upbringing on the basis of fact and fact alone spoils a child. He is selfish, greedy and without any moral values. He is the victim of the cruel Gradgrind system.

Tom has a strong dislike for his life at ‘stone lodge’ . He has abhorrence for his father’s system as a boy. He tells his sister that he is sick of his life in his father’s house and that he hates everybody except her. He calls himself a donkey and a mule. He calls his father’s house a ‘Jaundiced Jail’. His outburst is revealed in the following lines:

“I wish I could collect all the facts we hear so much about ...and all the figures and all the people who found them out; and I wish I could put a thousand barrels of gun powder under them, and blow them all up together!” (43)

Brought up under the utilitarian ethics he has no gratefulness to his father or sister. His sister sacrifices her happiness for his sake by marrying an elderly man whom she does not like. Yet he betrays the faith and confidence of Louisa. He uses his sister as a shield for his manifold secret, criminal activities. He has started leading a dissolute life of ease and pleasure. He does the job at the bank only nominally. Most of his time is spent in gambling, eating, drinking, and womanising. He becomes a moral rake. He goes to the extent of even confronting Bounderby who feels hurt but does not exhibit because of his love for Louisa. But Mrs. Sparsit and Bitzer and other employees of the bank often comment on the activities of Tom. Bitzer says that Tom is a dissipated extravagant idler, not worth his salt. Tom’s dissolute habits and expensive ways bring him to such a pass that he is knee deep in debts. The debts are paid off from time to time by Louisa, but she also comes to a stage when she finds herself unable to pay them off. Finally, under the bad habits and financial difficulties, Tom hatches a plan to rob the bank and throw the blame on the dismissed worker, Stephen. He does commit robbery in the bank. Thus Tom proves to be an illustration of failure of utilitarian philosophy.

The culture which Gradgrind taught to his children was the product of industrialization. This culture proved to be disastrous. Dickens seems to advocate a balance between nature and culture, ecology and industrialization through the metaphors of 'fancy' and 'fact'. The metaphors of 'rolling eye' and 'fixed eye' and their existence in one body shows the typical Dickensian way of imposing balance. It was Mr. Sleary whose physical features are significant and serve the purpose of the novelist. Dickens writes,

“Last of all appeared Mr. Sleary: a stout man has already mentioned with one fixed eye and one loose eye, ... and a muddled head which was never sober and never drunk.” (29)

It is obvious that Dickens did a great service to ecocultural ethics unconsciously, nay, it was very much their in his sub-consciousness.

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