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Child Workers in Select English Fiction: A Very Brief Survey

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Abstract:

As per the definition of *International Labour Organisation* (2012), ‘child labour’ is the “employment of children in any work that deprives children of their childhood, interferes with their ability to attend regular school, and that is mentally, physically, socially, or morally dangerous or harmful”. Even in the post-modern 21st century, the number of underage child-workers, who have been regularly marginalised in every sphere of society, is approximately 217 million, and in India, the number is around 10.1 million (2011 census data). Interestingly, even in the U.K. – long thought to be an upholder of human-rights – approximately 13,000 people (most of them children) are still (in May 2017) engaged in salve-like exploitative labour (<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/child-labour-exploitations-referrals-rise-figures-latest-a7752116.html>). In England, the employment of child workers reached its highest during the Industrial Revolution (1760-c.1820) – though the first British Act to regulate child labour was passed in 1803. In English literature, produced in Romantic and Victorian England, people could read in details about the miseries of the child-workers in different English industries and establishments. For example, Charles Lamb in his “The Praise of the Chimney Sweepers” (1823), Charles Dickens in his *Oliver Twist* (1838) and *David Copperfield* (1850), Frances Trollope’s *The Life and Adventures of Michael Armstrong, the Factory Boy* (1839), and Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna’s *Helen Fleetwood* (1841) are some of the short-stories and novels published in late-Romantic and early Victorian England which poignantly capture the situation of child labour in 18th-century Britain. In the present paper I propose to make a very brief survey of select Romantic and Victorian writings which focus on child

labour and child-workers, and of various depictions of the plight of these child labourers.

Keywords: Child-labour, Exploitation; Victorian Literature; Abuse; European situation.

Even in the 21st century, the menace of child labour is affecting almost all the countries of the world, including the so-called 'First World' nations. For any researcher into the social problems in any discipline, the employment of child labourers is one of the more important issues that deserve special attention and immediate addressing. Even more important is the issue of the marginalisation of these underage workers forever in mainstream societies. What is significant is that even in the 21st-century, child workers scarcely find mention in important literary works, and this could, of course, be considered as a politics of exclusion.

In spite of frantic efforts by different governmental and non-governmental organisations, 168 million child-workers existed all throughout the world in the first half of the present decade, as per the estimates of the U.N.I.C.E.F.¹In India, too, more than 10.1 million children are employed as child labourers: this actually indicates the gravity of the problem². Pramila Bhargava notes that India has the 'world's largest number of out-of-school children', which, indirectly, contributes to the increasing number of child labourers in the country (24). The European countries are not immune to this problem too. According to V.K. Dewan, the number of child-labourers is fast increasing in the Eastern and Central European countries (39). Naturally, it is not surprising that the problem of employment of child labourers would find portrayal in international publications – fiction and non-fiction – over the ages, including those in English. The present paper seeks to attempt a very brief review of the portrayal of child-labourers in select English writings of the Romantic and Victorian periods.

What is important is that in spite of championing itself as a region for the 'free human beings', the United Kingdom (more specifically, England) is a nation which was among the earlier ones to have made the wholesome usage of child labourers – at a time when India was a colony of the imperialist power. As Laura Del Col writes in her *Victorian Web*-e-essay (<http://www.victorianweb.org/history/workers1.html>), the employment of child-labourers in England had reached its maximum during the Victorian Age (1830-1901). Prior to this, there were approximately 0.12 million domestic servants in London alone in late-18th century, most

of them being underage workers. As Barbara Daniel records, child-labourers in England (during the 18th and 19th centuries) were employed in such sectors as coal-mining, machinery-maintenance, industrial cleaning, flower-and-match-stick-box-selling, sweeping and cleaning, and shoe-cleaning³. They would be underpaid – approximately, 10-20 per cent of an adult worker’s wage – and forced to work at least twelve hours a day. However, with the growth of the Trade Unions in England, the trend of employment of child labourers began to wane in the second half of the 19th century.

Even as select English intellectuals and writers began to commemorate the plight of the child workers in England in the 19th century, five *Acts* and *Measures* were passed in the country between 1802 and 1847, which aimed at lessening the number of the underage labourers. These *Acts* and *Measures* were the *Factory Acts* of 1802 and 1819, the *Child Labour Regulatory Act* of 1803, the Royal Commission-recommendation for limiting the labour-time of child-workers (1831), and the ten-hour-a-day *Labour Law* of 1847.⁴ These *Acts* and *Measures* apparently tried to improve the condition of the child-labourers, but their wretchedness could not be fully addressed. A section of English writers – mindful of these situations – began to produce novels and fiction from the first half of 19th-century onwards, which aimed at representing these miseries of British society – and these writings formed the sub-genre of ‘social novel’ (which was, later, further divided into different sub-genres like ‘factory novels’, ‘working-class fiction’, and ‘industrial novel’). Important contributors to this sub-genre included Thomas Holcroft (1745-1809), Elizabeth Inchbald (1753-1821), Benjamin Disraeli (1804-81), Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-65), and Charles Kingsley (1819-1875) among others.

However, the plight of the underage-workers in England are, arguably, captured most poignantly by four writers – Charles Lamb (1775-1834), Frances Trollope (1779-1863), Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna (1790-1846), and Charles Dickens (1812-70). It may be mentioned here that George Philips had castigated the British social customs of the 18th and 19th century for their habitual employment of child-workers, and the four authors mentioned above were unsparing in their criticism of the-then English social customs⁵. Emma Griffin notes,

“The widespread employment of very young children in factories and mines marked a break with traditional practice, and was something that some contemporaries found distasteful. It triggered a series of Parliamentary enquiries

into the working conditions of children in mines and factories. Their reports famously shocked Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Charles Dickens – inspiring ‘The Cry of the Children’ and *A Christmas Carol*. Child workers appeared in several other Dickens novels, most memorably in the form of Oliver Twist, with his narrow escape as the apprentice of Mr. Gamfield the chimney-sweep, and in David Copperfield. David Copperfield was based loosely on Dickens’s own experiences of starting work at Warren’s Blacking factory at the age of 12 following his father’s imprisonment for debt. Charles Kingsley’s *Water Babies* took up the plight of the nation’s chimney sweeps and a host more ephemeral novels, such as Frances Trollope’s *The Life and Adventures of Michael Armstrong, the Factory Boy* and Charlotte Elizabeth’s *Helen Fleetwood* also exposed the suffering of child workers to the middle-class reader. In addition, many of the period’s most vocal and prolific commentators turned their attention to child workers. And of course, the situation of child workers entered the political heart of the nation when reformers such as John Fielden and Lord Ashley, the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, took up their cause in Parliament”⁶.

Charles Lamb compiled his London-experiences in several essays collected in *Essays of Elia*(1823) and *The Last Essays of Elia*(1833). Throughout the 28 personal-essays of *Essays of Elia*(and in the 24 essays of *The Last Essays of Elia*), Lamb meticulously collates various phases of the metropolitan life of London, which also focuses on the employment of child-labourers. The plight of the child-labourers is especially portrayed in “The Praise of the Chimney Sweepers” (1823), which occurs in *Essays of Elia*. Recalling the employment of underage children by the English factory-owners to clean the factory-implements, especially the chimneys, Lamb writes about their hazardous job of cleaning oven-exhausts, their underfed health, their sadness, and their lack of sleep. I quote from the essay:

“When a child, what a mysterious pleasure it was to witness their operation! to see a chit no bigger than one’s self enter, one knew not by what process, into what seemed the *fauces averni*— to pursue him in imagination, as he went sounding on through so many dark stifling caverns, horrid shades! — to shudder with the idea that “now, surely, he must be lost forever!”— to revive at hearing his feeble shout of discovered day-light — and then (O fullness of delight) running out of doors, to come just in time to see the sable phenomenon emerge in

safety, the brandished weapon of his art victorious like some flag waved over a conquered citadel!”⁷

Lamb had written about underage workers in different other personal essays too, but his “The Praise of the Chimney Sweepers” is the strongest indirect criticism of the British social practice.

Published in 1839, Frances Trollope’s *The Life and Adventures of Michael Armstrong, the Factory Boy*, focusing on the life of the underage workers in industrial England, was published to numerous hostile reviews. Trollope had spent five years of her life in the United States of America (1827-32), and upon returning to England she was shocked to notice the mistreatment of young boys who were employed in British industries. In 1832 itself, she conducted a visit to Manchester to notice the condition of the young factory-workers⁸, and she recollected her experiences in *Michael Armstrong*.

In the novel, Matthew Dowling, a cruel and lecherous businessman, adopts the factory-child Michael Armstrong not out of benevolence but to establish himself as a philanthropist. Whereas it was thought in Industrial Revolution-influenced England (1760-1820) that individual charities would benefit the child-workers, Trollope takes an opposing view, and paints the various dangerous adventures Armstrong has after Dowling get bored and tries to apprentice Armstrong to Deep Valley Mills, an establishment for unwanted pauper children. At the end of the novel, Michael Armstrong marries his childhood-friend Fanny Fletcher, but the couple move away from England. A section of the novel takes place at ‘Ashleigh’, which is identifiably Manchester, and Trollope describes the numerous miseries underage workers face there. As Brenda Ayres notes,

“Despite its fairytale ending, the novel has much to say about the wretched conditions of industry workers and about the class divide, which is broached by the love Mary not only shows to those her father has exploited, but which is powerfully and shockingly demonstrated by her marriage. The novel also subverts class restrictions by arguing that the poor, despite popular notions held to the contrary by those who were not poor, were not animals, and given the opportunity, could be educated enough to become gentlefolk. Likewise, Trollope undermines the infallibility of the ruling class by exposing the impoverished

moral character of Sir Dowling and the hypocrisy of Lady Shrimpton. Dowling's social and economic fall is a reminder that poverty is not necessarily innate, that it can come upon any of her readers; therefore, they should show mercy to those less fortunate"⁹.

Charles Dickens – always a vociferous critic of British social norms – has criticised the employment of child-labourers in *Oliver Twist* (1837-39), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39), *David Copperfield* (1849-50), and *Great Expectations* (1860-61). I am a researcher of social-work; hence it is not possible for me to analyse the literary aspects of these four novels deeply. However, I can point out how the four novels present the child-workers in Victorian England. In *Oliver Twist*, Oliver is forced to work at a workhouse at a tender age, and works under “Mr.Sowerberry” before joining a London-based gang of pickpockets. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, Nicholas is forced to work for Mr.Squeers. In *David Copperfield*, the protagonist is as mistreated in his family after the death of his parents as were the child-workers in their workplaces. Finally, in *Great Expectations*, Philip Pirrip is forced to work under his abusive sister but loving brother-in-law as an apprentice blacksmith. Dickens's novels have earned recognition as specimen Victorian literature especially because of his portrayal of children and child workers (Dutta 1-4).

Finally, I would also like to review the presentation of child-labourers in Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna's *Helen Fleetwood* (1841). In Tonna's novel, Helen Fleetwood, is a village orphan who has been adopted by Green, a poor widow, and raised together with her grandchildren in a rented cottage in the agricultural South. In the 1841-novel, Tonna shockingly portrays the exploitation of children in Victorian factories – especially how they are abused mentally and sexually. The children, whom Tonna depicts, are overworked, underfed, and lack parental and religious guidance. Susan Zlotnick writes that *Helen Fleetwood* is not only an anti-child-labour novel but also a social novel focusing on how the ‘ignorance’ of the ‘guardians’ of orphans especially added to the exploitation of the underage workers (Zlotnick 150). Carla Fusco reads,

“Similarly to other early Victorian female writers such as Frances Trollope and Harriet Martineau, Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna devoted her artistic production to fictional narratives with the aim of informing middle and upper class novel readers of what was occurring in the industrial areas of England. Her narrative is

characterised by a paternalistic style used to better dramatise the living conditions of the proletariat. Although the aesthetic value of her work is rather insignificant, she contributed to preparing the ground for later and greater novelists such as Dickens and Gaskell as well as indicating the path to be taken by welfare reforms. She was also the restless, polemical author of many pamphlets and religious writings, although, unlike other contemporary Evangelicals, she did not believe that poverty and starvation were the inevitable consequence of the divine plan. Charlotte Elizabeth, to use her ‘pen name’, can also claim the distinction of being one of the few who wrote at length about factory girls and children and strenuously condemned their dire situation. She was also conscious that industrialisation had to be ruled with clear legal measures. This was her mission, since she firmly believed in literature as a powerful tool to improve society. Her approach to the issue was systematic and scientific; she first saw at first hand all that she subsequently described, inspecting many factories in detail to determine their nature and condition. She also grounded her quest on reality by using tales and narrative material borrowed from the Blue Books. Tonna became very popular through the publication of her novel *Helen Fleetwood*, serialised between 1839 and 1841, which reported the appalling story of an orphan compelled to work when she was little more than a child. Between 1843 and 1847 she published a second social reform novel entitled *The Wrongs of Woman*. This mingles fact with fiction in order to attract the attention of as many readers as possible” (15-16).

There are several other works of English fiction which deal with the issue of the exploitation and marginalisation of child workers in societies. As a social-worker, it is not possible for me to attempt an overview of all of these publications. What I have attempted here is to attempt to reread the representation of child-workers in select publications by select English authors. As the Indian law is based on English penal code, it is important to understand the attitude of the Englishmen towards child-labourers, which might have brought about gradual changes in Indians’ attitude toward employment of child-labourers too.

Notes:

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