

Prisha Gupta*

THE GEOPOLITICAL SPACE OF COKETOWN AS THE CONFLUENCE OF THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION, UTILITARIANISM AND CLASS STRUGGLE

ABSTRACT: Dickens wrote at a time when the root cause for social inequality could be regarded as the private ownership of economic resources. The present paper establishes the prevalent class struggle that was an outcome of increasing feudalism, capitalism and institutionalized education system through Charles Dickens' novel *Hard Times* published in 1854. The paper is divided into two sections. The first section explores the contextual realities of the time in which *Hard Times* was written. The second section

digs deeper into the make-belief world of Coketown and shows how it manifests itself within the larger framework of the theoretical instigations underlying the societal substructure. The text proves to be a simplistic rendering of the industrial town that serves as a setting for the story with the help of the symbolism of the circus in the novel. The social issues are brought to life with the help of the highly sentimental scenes and characters that stand for various virtues in life.

Keywords: Charles Dickens, Industrial Revolution, Utilitarianism, Class Struggle, Nineteenth-Century Literature, Realism

JEL Codes: B30, G38, O14, P1, P3

INTRODUCTION

The present paper reflects on the geopolitical space of Coketown with respect to the socio-economic conditions of its era that surveys Victorian society. It probes over the utilitarian philosophy that has been imbibed by numerous personas within the text. At the same time, it tries to rationalize these realities within the larger framework of the prevalent conditions that were an outcome of the Industrial revolution. These conditions give rise to the underpinning lived realities that can be witnessed through a vivid characterization that directs the readers towards the contemporaneous

*Assistant Professor (Guest Faculty), Maharaja Agrasen Institute of Management Studies, Delhi

THE GEOPOLITICAL SPACE OF COKETOWN AS THE CONFLUENCE OF THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION, UTILITARIANISM AND CLASS STRUGGLE

class struggle that proved to be a dreadful reality for a marginalized fraction of the society. It also looks at the various social institutions that have been seen as part and parcel of ideal societies but shown to be crumbling down in the present text due to the shallow and the hypocritical groundings it stands on. All these institutions work within the social structures and are reflective of the confluence of the industrial revolution, utilitarianism and class struggle.

HARD TIMES

Hard Times presents the social and economic conditions of capitalism that were part of nineteenth-century England. It captures the rise of the bourgeoisie class, growth of factory labourers, class violence that was an outcome of the growing industrialism. What makes Dickens' works socially and culturally relevant to date is his remarkable characterization that offers insights into the social evils. His characters have been perceived as caricatures yet the depth lies in their reflection of the failures of humanity. His characters are the product of the society that they inhabit. Literary texts reflect society and capture their morals and values.

COKETOWN

Victorian political economy can be understood by reading the text within the context of certain prevalent ideologies. Coketown is representative of an industrial town that inhabits the characters who are representatives of the social class of those times. The persona of Mr. James Harthouse is representative of the upper class and makes a social commentary on this class by reflecting on its follies. His character imbibes all the vices that are necessary for the exploitation of the underprivileged sections of the society. Thomas Gradgrind along with Louisa Gradgrind, Mr. Josiah Bounderby and Mrs. Sparsit are representative of the class, that tries to justify everything through their hard work, the middle class. The representative of the working class is Mr. Stephen Blackpool who works in Bounderby's factory and is shown suffering from the hard conditions of life. On one hand, is the character of Mr. Harthouse can afford to seduce the married character of Louisa for new things to get rid of his monotonous life. On the other hand, is the character of Stephen Blackpool who cannot afford to divorce his wife and marry his lover for the lack of money. This is representative of how there is an evident class division in the society that these characters are a part of. The novel doesn't stop at the social commentary but also leaves the readers with hope for a socio-economic revolution that may reform the society towards social justice and equality.

CLASS STRUGGLE

It is an established fact that each political party reflects, in many ways, the interest of certain classes in society. Socialist states primarily focus on the needs of the working class and peasantry while on the other hand, capitalist states represent the interest of the class that thrives on exploiting the working class.

Broadly speaking, it is the social being that determines the consciousness of a person contrary to the other determining factors. Those who own the production are the ones who decide the general consciousness of society. Social class can be defined as a group of people who share the same cultural, socio-economic and political status in society. It is therefore easy to identify the different social classes by identifying the inequalities like authority, power, religion, work, education. This class binary can be described in Marxist terms as Bourgeoisie and Proletariat. The bourgeoisie is the Capitalist class or the one which owns the land, financial institutions, factories, etc. They derive their power through materialistic means. The Proletariat class or the labour class is at the periphery with nothing to own except for their ability to provide physical labour.

Coketown embodies the characteristics of the Victorian age that saw a rapid change in the scientific and technological domain. It is also a representative space showcasing the aftermath of the Industrial revolution. Several factors led to the Industrial revolution including the development of machines powered by water, the development of fertilisers and crop rotation systems, the increased production of iron and coal extraction. With the advent of steam trains and new industries, not just travelling became easy but also many commercial products could now be made at a faster pace. Clearly, the upper class gained the most out of this socio-economical shift and kept the political power of the country for themselves. The middle class also created wealth and did benefit from the revolution but was completely devoid of any political power. It can be said that the Industrial Revolution is responsible for the emergence of the middle class which comprised professionals like traders, engineers, lawyers, teachers, etc. The class that was adversely affected by this revolution is the working class that became the victim of oppression. The working class got its young children to work in factories and mills. Working conditions of the times were getting worse and with the increase in child labour, many children fell prey to exploitation at the hands of the factory owners. The narrative technique adapted by Dickens came to be known as realism, which can be defined as a style of writing that aims at representing

THE GEOPOLITICAL SPACE OF COKETOWN AS THE CONFLUENCE OF THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION, UTILITARIANISM AND CLASS STRUGGLE

reality as it is. This school of thought encouraged the accurate documentation of the sociological observations.

On the surface, Coketown may appear to be a geopolitical space narrating the story of its characters but an in-depth study reveals how it comes out to present a critique of various social institutions of the times. It functions as a setting that thrives to expose the class struggle where the exploitation of one social class by another shows the ill-effects of industrial capitalism. At this juncture, the industrial revolution and communist ideology come face-to-face.

The narrative voice presents a sublime experience on two levels, on the base level it is the unifying component that is visible within the circus members. This can be seen in a n episode where Sissy Jupe's pet dog Merrylegs is brutally beaten by her drunkard father but yet Sissy's father is apologetic for his actions and is devoted towards his dog. This establishes that it is the joblessness and resultant poverty which brings out the bestiality of a man, furthermore, the sobbing figure of Sissy's father portrays a heart-rendering reality of early nineteenth-century England choking the lived experience of Coketown. This episode can be starkly contrasted with the way the figure of a horse has been dealt with. On the higher level, the sublimity is clearly visible, in the latter part of the novel, in the Gradgrind household. As portrayed in the initial half of the text, it is Louisa with her training in cold logic who is presented as a prominent figure but it has always been Sissy Jupe, who maintains the human compassion. But after Tom's untimely and tragic death and Louisa's failed marriage with Bounderby, it is Sissy who finally gains prominence. It is her innate quality of truth and love that prevails over hard logic, this is visible through Mrs. Gradgrind's change in attitude towards Sissy. Also, Louisa's younger sister, Jane Gradgrind, being raised by Sissy, grows up to be a much sort after girl in comparison to Louisa. The text offers a harsh critique of the education system that takes pride in encouraging rote learning as compared to understanding the conceptual values that helps building an emotional component in the students. It also offers a critic of the institution of family and marriage where the structure is based on cold logic and is devoid of any warmth or emotional connection.

UTILITARIANISM

Hard Times offers a bleak criticism of the utilitarian philosophy that prevailed in Victorian England. Utilitarianism is the belief that human beings, in general, begin to think of their self-interest over other sections of society. Charles Dicken's *Hard Times* can be considered as a cornerstone text propounding upon the ideals of utilitarianism as exhibited through the

imaginary place named Coketown. In the novel, Dickens creates certain personas to portray the contemporary social evils devouring the individuals as manifested through the geopolitical space in the backdrop of Industrial Revolution.

In Coketown, Mr. Thomas Gradgrind, a significant character in the text, runs a school. His character is representative of someone who firmly believes in utilitarianism and has completely imbibed this philosophy into his students from a very young age. He has ensured that his children too follow his footsteps, especially his five daughters. Mr. Gradgrind is a staunch follower of utilitarian theory and expects everyone around him to uphold this belief system. He gives a lot of importance to the books and never strays from his theory that focuses on the importance of facts and numbers. He tries to integrate his value system into Coketown's education system. The young and fresh minds are looked at by the school teachers, but unmolded as basic ambitions, eagerly waiting to be loaded with knowledge. They are determined to build potential jobs for Mr. Bounderby's own factories and mould themselves to fit into the monotonous lifestyle. They do not consider, however, that apart from the mechanistic half, there is art and philosophy which makes people humane, filling them with human sympathy and compassion, and elevates the condition of human existence. The children are staunchly warned against fiction, poetry, and other fine arts and are specifically warned not to 'wonder'. They try to create a state of mind where children shall be good workers in the future in a highly mechanized world, but at the cost of losing individual freedom, choice and opinions.

On the other hand, is the character of Mr. Josiah Bounderby who can be seen as a hardcore capitalist. He owns production units within the geopolitical space of Coketown. He is also a practitioner of utilitarianism, as he has his profit motives as the driving force. Josiah Bounderby is the decisive capitalist and an exemplar of utilitarianism. A compulsive fibber and a fabricator, he draws the future worker for his establishments from the school being run by Gradgrind, which validates the continual impression that students should be taught facts, and not fiction. One of the wealthiest persons in the geospatial locale of Coketown, he owns a bank and a factory, he lies about his struggles and declares himself to be destitute, though later, his lies are caught red-handed by his mother. Being the capitalist, he believes and preaches that profit is the sole motive of life. Both in his factory and his bank, there are many employees, and he refers to the workers as "hands," the sole body part which is of significant importance to him. He often tries to shake the moral paradigm of ethics while all they want is a decent working condition and a fair wage for their work. Being driven by profits, he is not concerned about the welfare of his

THE GEOPOLITICAL SPACE OF COKETOWN AS THE CONFLUENCE OF THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION, UTILITARIANISM AND CLASS STRUGGLE

employees. Moreover, he is well aware of his position within the economical hierarchy. When one of his employees, Stephen Blackpool asks for his advice regarding his failing marriage, he retorts back by saying that divorce is not a viable solution for him, due to his social positioning, as divorcing involves substantial economic support, which individuals like Bounderby ensure that workers like Stephen are never laced with.

Apart from these powerful individuals who indirectly rule over the town of Coketown, the proletarian segment is also captured by Dickens. This class is represented through the factory workers and the group of circus members. Both these factions are forced to deal with the brunt of the industrial revolution and the ensuing economic depravity and the resultant poverty. These two segments feature individuals and families, who lie at the oppositional reality of utilitarianism.

The community of people working for the circus are simple and open-minded human beings whose goal in life is to make people laugh. Interestingly, they are also situated among the lowest rungs of human existence. The circus life reeks of rampant poverty, and yet, they lie outside the purview of the factory workers like Stephen Blackpool. They are hated by the utilitarian heads of the geopolitical space of Coketown, especially Gradgrind and Bounderby, as they seem to encompass the values that utilitarianism condemns and essentially renders useless

Emotions such as passion, imagination, and laughter are portrayed, and the circus is like a carnival, where the conglomeration of participants takes place purely based on the potential of comedy. In addition, by a sense of unification, their world is affirmed, giving them a feeling of community. It is a space where individualism, as promoted by utilitarianism, ultimately fails to hold its ground. Rather, it's a space identified by the members' mutual and co-dependence, something that is vehemently rejected by utilitarian heads. The only representation of the circus in the latter part of the book is Sissy Jupe, who, after her father's death, is adopted by the Gradgrind tribe. It is the Gradgrind family where these two facts of opposition are pitted against each other pithily. Sissy Jupe, free from the pitfalls of utilitarianism, is the supreme and, in a way, the only survivor of the free world. She exercises free will and may not be as smart as Bitzer, but is humane in essence, and helps Tom save his life (though he dies a painful, pathetic, and untimely death).

CONCLUSION

While Dickens doesn't explain any of the progress of the other school children, at least three children are displaying the doctrines of utilitarianism. All the students are from the school run by Mr. Thomas

Gradgrind and these are Bitzer, Tom, and Louisa. The students are robbed of empathy, as has already been stated, and they fail to respond according to the circumstances. Bitzer is Gradgrind's scholarly student, who can describe anything on paper. He is full of statistical and factual knowledge, he succeeds in mathematically describing a horse, even though he is young. This episode is in stark contrast to Sissy Jupe, whose father is a circus worker. She is one of the circus members herself and has certainly seen horses many times, but she struggles miserably to describe a horse. This is precisely how utilitarianism tampers with young children's brains, and the characters of Tom and Louisa, are indicators of how miserably this utilitarian approach collapsed. Tom is a young man who, so fed up with the strictness and repetition of his father, revolts against him and leaves home to work at the Bank of Mr. Bounderby. He begins to gamble, and he robs a bank to get out of debt and is forced to leave the scene. When Bitzer learns that Tom is the suspect, and catches him, Mr. Gradgrind asks him to let Tom go, reminding him of all the hard work he's been doing while at school. Bitzer, however, uses dry statistics and insists that he pays for his schooling, and he owes little more to Gradgrind. While it may be argued that Tom could reasonably be turned over for his crime to the authorities, this episode poses the disturbing likelihood of lack of human compassion, where all the programs are evaluated within the rubrics of the neoliberal mode of production through their capital values. In the greater sense of life, apart from Tom, Louisa still struggles, which again brings us back to the utilitarian world. In the human essence of human life, she, like Tom, is naive and lacks the lived knowledge of emotions. While, contrary to her father's wish, she agrees to marry Bounderby, it is obvious that she does not love him. Since she does not grasp the apparently elusive idea of marriage, and she remains married to Bounderby to live a life within the dictates of the Victorian tradition until she faces an enticing Mr. Harthouse, who attracts her affection and emotions deceptively towards himself. Louisa, relatively inexperienced of carnal instincts, panics and becomes frantic. At this point, Mr. Gradgrind understands that his ideology and belief system, largely governed by utilitarianism, is bound to fail because he is unable to find any solution for Louisa, who is inconsolable. In this scenario, at least, Gradgrind becomes the parent, not the headmaster of the school, and shows sympathy for his daughter.

REFERENCES

- Abrams, M. H., & Harpham, G. G. (1999). *A glossary of literary terms*. Boston, Mass: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Dickens, C., Nunokawa, J., & McWeeny, G. (2004). *Charles Dickens' Hard times*. New York: Pearson Longman.

THE GEOPOLITICAL SPACE OF COKETOWN AS THE CONFLUENCE OF THE
INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION, UTILITARIANISM AND CLASS STRUGGLE

Gilmour, R. (1993). *The Victorian period: The intellectual and cultural context of English literature, 1830-1890*. London: Longma
Mill, J. S., & Sher, G. (1979). *Utilitarianism*. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co.