



CHARLES DICKENS AND XENOPHOBIA

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ABSTRACT

Students of English literature and readers of fiction writings have heard a lot about Charles Dickens (1812-1870), one of the greatest nineteenth century English novelists and his remarkable contribution in English literature. This paper offers a re-evaluation of Charles Dickens's writings. Over the years, Dickens has been dismissed as a gritty and unrelenting racist and xenophobic that is vindicated apropos some of his writings from the 1850s until the end of his life. It is a known fact that he despised Indians and made a scathing racial attack against them on the backdrop of the 'Sepoy Mutiny' of 1857 during the British occupation in India. What provoked him to make such nasty, obnoxious racial remarks?

Keywords: Colonialism, Racism, British Empire, Postcolonial theory, Re-evaluation

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As a prolific Victorian writer of novels, plays, novellas, and non-fictional prose including letters, Charles John Huffam Dickens (7 February 1812 – 9 June 1870) became known all over the world for his remarkable characters, his mastery of prose, and his depictions of the social classes, customs and values of his times. Some believed that he was a staunch defender of the working classes and has often been celebrated as a champion of the oppressed and the downtrodden. But it has sometimes been noted that both in his journalism and fiction he expresses attitudes that can be interpreted as racist and xenophobic. He opposed slavery but defended colonialists against their native attackers and opposed suffrage for blacks on grounds of cultural superiority. Questions have been raised as to whether Dickens believed in biological determinism or was instead a cultural chauvinist. Ledger and Ferneaux do not believe he advocated any form of "scientific racism" regarding heredity - he had no concept at all of a superior "master race" and could not be described as either a white

supremacist or segregationist – but still had the highest possible antipathy for the lifestyles of native peoples in British colonies, and believed that the sooner they were civilised, the better. (Ledger 297–299) The *Oxford Dictionary of English Literature* describes Dickens as nationalistic often both stigmatising foreign European cultures and taking his attitude to "colonized people" to "genocidal extremes" (Kastan 157), albeit based mainly on a vision of British virtue, but not on any concept of heredity. The *Historical Encyclopedia of anti-semitism* notes the paradox of Dickens both being a "champion of causes of the oppressed" who abhorred slavery and supported the European liberal revolutions of the 1840s. (Levy 176-177)

Peter Ackroyd in his 1990 biography of Dickens points out Dickens' sympathy for the poor, his tirade against child labour, his concern for sanitation reform and above all his opposition to capital punishment. He also asserts: "In modern terminology Dickens was a 'racist' of the most egregious kind, a fact that ought to give pause to

those who persist in believing that he was necessarily the epitome of all that was decent and benign in the previous century.” (Ackroyd 544) Ackroyd further points out that Dickens did not believe that the North in the American Civil War was genuinely interested in the abolition of slavery, and he nearly publicly supported the South for that reason. Interestingly, in Dickens’ biography, Ackroyd twice notes that Dickens’ major objection to missionaries was that they were more concerned with natives abroad than with the poor at home. In another significant event, Dickens did not join other liberals in condemning Jamaica’s Governor Eyre’s declaration of martial law after an attack on the capital’s court house. Speaking on the controversy, Dickens’ rather attacked “that platform sympathy with the black- or the native or the Devil..” (Ackroyd 971)

Sally Ledger and Holly Furneaux comment that it is a riddle as to how one can square away Dickens’ racialism for concern with the poor and the downcast. They point out one such reference in the novel *Bleak House*, in which Dickens mocks Mrs. Jellyby who neglects her children for the natives of a fictional African country. In *Dickens in Context*, Ledger and Furneaux argue that Dickens was a nativist and “cultural chauvinist” in the sense of being highly ethnocentric and in his justification of British imperialism. But at the same time they also argue that Dickens is not a racist in the sense of being a “biological determinist” as, in their opinion, Dickens did not regard the behaviour of races to be “fixed”; rather his appeal to “civilization” suggests not biological fixity but the possibility of alteration. However, “Dickens views of racial others, most fully developed in his short fiction, indicate that for him ‘savages’ functioned as a handy foil against which British national identity could emerge.” (Ledger 297-299)

Patrick Brantlinger, in his *A companion to the Victorian Novel*, also points out the dichotomy of Dickens’ criticism of slavery on the one hand and his caricatures of other races on the other hand. He refers to Dickens’ description of an Irish colony in America’s Catskill mountains a mess of pigs, pots, and dunghills. Dickens views them as a “racially repellent” group. (Brantlinger 91) Mendelawitz, in

the introduction to an anthology of Dickens’ essays *Household Words*, cautions that in these essays “Women, the Irish, Chinese and Aborigines are described in biased, racist, stereotypical or otherwise less than flattering terms....We encourage you to work towards a more positive understanding of the different groups that make up our community” (Mendelawitz vi). Another historian, Jane Smiley, writes: “we should not interpret him as the kind of left-liberal we know today-he was racist, imperialist, sometimes anti-semitic, a believer in harsh prison conditions, and distrustful of trade unions.” (Smiley 117)

Dickens and Wilkie Collins co-authored a fiction work *The Perils of Certain English Prisoners* which allegorically presents the Indian Rebellion of 1857. It has a fictional character “native Sambo” which is modelled on the Indian mutineers and is describes as a “double-dyed traitor, and a most infernal villain” who takes part in a massacre of women and children, in an allusion to the Cawnpore Massacre (Stewart). The British media report of the massacre in which over a hundred English prisoners, mostly women and children, were reportedly killed by the Indian mutineers on 4 October 1857 moved Dickens very much and his xenophobic character, according to William Oddie, “grew progressively more illiberal over the course of his career” (Oddie, 3). In a private letter to Baroness Burdett-Coutts, Dickens unleashed his anger and xenophobia: “I wish I were Commander in Chief over there [India]! I would address that Oriental character which must be powerfully spoken to, in something like the following placard, which should be vigorously translated into all native dialects, “I, The Inimitable, holding this office of mine, and firmly believing that I hold it by the permission of Heaven and not by the appointment of Satan, have the honor to inform you Hindoo gentry that it is my intention, with all possible avoidance of unnecessary cruelty and with all merciful swiftness of execution, to exterminate the Race from the face of the earth, which disfigured the earth with the late abominable atrocities” (Moore, *Dickens and Empire*)

According to Lillian Nayder, Wilkie Collins was less hostile to the Indian people in comparison

to his collaborator Dickens and he did not squarely blame them for the massacre as was the case with Dickens. Nayder also pointed out that Collins had disassociated himself from Dickens' desire of exterminating the Indian race and rather, in his own work *A Sermon for the Sepoys*, he appealed for moral goodness by invoking to the Indian mutineers from an Indian sacred text and not a Christian one. In Collins' famous novel *The Moonstone* he suggests that it is really the Indians who were mainly on the defensive during the mutiny, not the British, contrary to the prevalent impression given by the British press. (Nayder 67)

Grace Moore observes a shift in perspective in Dickens vis-a-vis xenophobia and pointed out that after a similar incident in Jamaica when Governor Eyre put down a revolt with abysmal brutality in 1865, Dickens did not express the same level of vehemence that he expressed towards the Indians mutineers. Although it was Dickens and Carlyle who warmly applauded Governor Eyre's sadism, while John Stuart Mill and Thomas Huxley demanded that he be brought before the Parliament, but the earlier venomous overtone is subsided. Grace maintains that the reason for this change in perspective is Dickens' greater awareness of the brutal actions of British soldiers toward natives in their colonies. Grace goes to the extent of suggesting that Dickens has regretted his former attitude. This view of Grace contradicts the views of Patrick Bratlinger and William Oddie who observe that this xenophobia and racism are squarely present, and even more evident, in the later writings of Dickens,

In the opinion of Grace Moore, Dickens' attitude towards Native Americans in his essay *The Noble Savage*, is one of condescending pity, tempered by a counterbalancing concern with the arrogance of European colonialism (Moore, *Noble Savage* 236). In a way this essay was Dickens' rejection of painter George Catlin's positive portrayal of Native Americans. The term "Noble Savage" was used by the Europeans since the 17th century, but Dickens regards it as an absurd oxymoron and he opined that savages be civilised "off the face of the earth".

Charles Dickens's xenophobia or racism is most vividly surfaced in his portrayal of Fagin in one

of his most widely read novels *Oliver Twist*. Some critics consider the depiction of Fagin as deeply anti-Semitic, though Dickens' biographer G. K. Chesterton refuted it. In the first 38 chapters of the novel Fagin is referred 257 times as "the Jew", while there is hardly any mention of the ethnicity or religion of the other characters. The character of Fagin is thought to have been modelled on a real character Ikey Solomon, a 19th-century Jewish criminal in London, who was interviewed by Dickens when he was working as a journalist. (Rutland 19) Nadia Valdman, who writes about the portrayal of Jews in literature, argues that Fagin's representation was drawn from the image of the Jew as inherently evil, that the imagery associated him with the Devil, and with beasts.

Eliza Davis, whose husband had purchased Dickens's home in 1860, took an exception of this negative portrayal of Fagin. In a letter to Dickens she complained that, by portraying Fagin negatively, the latter had done a great wrong to the Jewish people and he "encouraged a vile prejudice against the despised Hebrew" (Hitchens) Dickens took her complaint seriously and stopped the printing of the next episodes of *Oliver Twist* which was published in the form of serials in the periodical and changed the text for the rest parts where Fagin was barely mentioned at all in the next 179 references as "the Jew". In his subsequent novel, *Our Mutual Friend*, he created the character of Riah which means 'friend' in Hebrew, whose goodness, Valley writes, is almost as complete as Fagin's evil. Riah says in the novel: "Men say, 'This is a bad Greek, but there are good Greeks. This is a bad Turk, but there are good Turks.' Not so with the Jews ... they take the worst of us as samples of the best ..." Davis sent Dickens a copy of the Hebrew bible in gratitude. Dickens not only toned down Fagin's Jewishness in revised editions of *Oliver Twist*, but removed Jewish elements from his depiction of Fagin in his public readings from the novel, omitting nasal voice mannerisms and body language he had included in earlier readings. (Lebrecht)

But this xenophobia or racism is not something exclusive in Charles Dickens as, in an essay on George Eliot, K.M. Newton writes:

"Most of the major writers in the Victorian period can be seen as racist to a greater or lesser degree. According to Edward Said, even Marx and Mill are not immune: 'both of them seemed to have believed that such ideas as liberty, representative government, and individual happiness must not be applied to the Orient for reasons that today we would call racist'. In many of these writers antisemitism was the most obvious form of racism, and this continued beyond the Victorian period, as is evident in such figures as T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf." (Newton 3)

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Munni Deb Mazumder did her MA in English and B.Ed. from Assam University, Silchar. She did her Ph.D. on the plays of Tennessee Williams. She has also worked as a Project Fellow in a UGC sponsored Major Research Project on the issues of Tea Tribes of Assam. She has also published articles in international journals and edited book.