

CHILDREN AS OPPRESSED BEINGS IN DICKENS' DAVID COPPERFIELD**Dr. Jitender Dhull**

Asstt. Professor, D.A.V. Centenary College, Faridabad

Abstract: - David Copperfield throws light on the treatment of childhood and its obligations and various evils of industrial revolution, especially the miserable condition of the children working in workhouses from dawn to dusk for a few coins. Many laws were passed by the government, but they were just for the influential people. The factory owners were free to exploit the tender children for their own selfish motives. The general harshness of the age can also be noticed in the cruel treatment of the children at schools. Education is mainly in the private hands.

Keywords: - Copperfield, industrial.

Introduction

In his famous novel David Copperfield, Dickens tries to throw light on the evils prevailing in the society. It was a time when power was concentrated only in the hands of a few capitalists and wealth was dominating the prestige. The condition of the prisons and workhouses was miserable. The education had been industrialized and the schools were run only for money. But the worst of all was the condition of the children. They were used as a tool for illegal work and they were exploited in the workhouses from dawn to dusk for a few coins.

There is an autobiographical touch in almost every page of the novel. Two important generalizations emerge from Forster's biography which is of immediate relevance to us. First Forester is especially emphatic about Dickens' strong belief that his personal past exercised an ineradicable influence not just on his personality. There is an uncomfortable suggestion here of being menaced to one's past just as the convicts were shackled to the Lulksin the Thames Estuary.

The past can be a tyrant as well as a stimulus to enjoyable nostalgia. Dickens told Forester, apropos of David Copperfield, that it was in part the dramatization of his own life. David's early childhood was good as he was brought up by the tender love of his mother and his nurse Miss. Peggotty. As a child David led a carefree life and he was completely unaware about the problems of the world of adults. Now gone are the days and he leads a wretched life, he remembers the early childhood:

"We are playing in the winter Twilight, dancing about the parlour when my mother is out of breath and rests herself in an elbow chair; I watch her winding her bright curls round her fingers, and straightening her waist and nobody, knows better than I do that she likes to look so well, and is proud of being so pretty."¹

From chapter i to xv of the book we are told about the childhood of David. They vividly portray the childhood scenes. The happy moments of David's childhood are very crucial when he stays with his mother and nurse Miss. Peggotty. Also, worth remembering is his visit to Yarmouth, on the sea coast, with Miss. Petgotty. David recalls:

"We used to walk about that dim old flat at Yarmouth in a loving manner, hours and hours. The days sported by us, as if time had not grown up by himself yet, but were a child too, and always at play."²

David friendship with Steerforth and Traddles is another happy occasion in his otherwise gloomy, dark, desolate childhood. About Traddles, he says that, "he was very honorable Treadles was, and held it as a solemn duty in the boys to stand by one another. He suffered for this and several occasions."³ David's all praise for Steerforth too. "There was no noise, no effort, and no consciousness, in anything he did; but in every thing an indescribable lightness, a seeming impossibility of doing anything else, or doing any thing better which was so graceful, so natural and agreeable."⁴

As soon as David remembers his mother he at once experiences the same image

as he often used to experience as she was with "pretty hair and youthful shape, and peggotty, with no shape at all, and eyes so dark that they seemed to darken their whole neighbourhood."⁵

It is clear from the above quotation that for David his mother was no less than a goddess. Neither she was like Peggotty, nor like any other woman as she was tender in love. As a matter of fact the world of his mother was very safe for David. But unfortunately this safe world soon disappears as soon as his mother marries second time to a harsh and cruel man Murdstone David was expelled from the tender and safe world of his mother and very soon he was helpless to find himself in a bewildered and depressed world of his father.

In the life of David the entry of Murdstone hits the visions of David like a stone. His second father comes as an intruder who compels the child to detach himself from the world of his mother. As soon as David is introduced to Murdstone, he is confronted by a new world that brought a cold blast of air in to the house which blew away the old feeling like a feather. Mr. Murdstone and his sister took everything in their hands. They dominated the house according to their tastes. Now the child like mother of David worked like a puppet whose strings were in the hands of Murdstones. The innocent childhood of David came to an end and his life became miserable and wretched. He was rebuked again and again for nothing.

David has a horrible image of Murdstones. Regarding his step father Murdstone, David is of the view that Murdstone is an intrusive father who snatched away his carefree life and is responsible for breaking the bond of love between David and his mother.

"He patted on the head; but somehow, I didn't like him or his deep voice, and I was jealous that his hand should touch my mother in touching me, which it did. I put it away as well as I could."⁶

As a matter of fact David did not like Murdstone for two reasons, first is that he was

not a lovable fellow, but the main reason is that he did not want to allow him to come near to his mother. Always David's mother persuaded him to shake the right hand with Murdstone but he always resolved often Murdstone called David a brave fellow and patted on him as his own son. On the other hand David didn't like it Murdstone's eyes appeared to David as ill-opinioned.

Earlier both Murdstone and his sister showed a tender love to David and his mother. But as soon as Murdstone succeeded in his aim to marry David's mother, there came a sudden change in their behaviour. Now Miss Murdstone took the place of a surrogate mother and became the mistress of the house. She possessed the household keys and changed the entire course of action in the house of David. They took the charge of David's education. Always David was being instructed not to do this and not to do that. On the other hand David was sick of the gracious daily drudgery and misery.

It is true that David never loved his lessons but there was a little difference in his mind towards them. When mother assigned them for him he was willing to learn them and David laboured to learn them at his mother's knee. But as soon as David came into contact with Murdstones, the lessons became very hard humorous and unintelligible. Always David was bewildered by them.

It seemed that David lost all the interest of study, and he was beaten up by his hardhearted father. His mother was a helpless observer and she found herself unable to rescue him. It was not possible for David to mingle with other children of the street. The Murdstones were heartless and all the time they kept David as a culprit in the house. According to David the Murdstones were out of tone as regarding love. They wanted to have only a firm grip on him as David's imagination reflects:

"Firmness, I, may observe, was the grand quality on which Mr. and Miss. Murdstone took their stand. However, I might have expressed my comprehension of it at that time if I had been called upon, I nevertheless did

clearly comprehend in my own way, that it was another name for tyranny.”⁷

In an atmosphere of cruel treatment David became sullen, dull and alien. He was beaten up daily, but after the six months of beast like treatment, one day he came fully prepared for the lessons but as soon as he faced Murdstone, he forgot everything. As a result he was beaten up again and he cried out by saying that: “Mr. Murdstone ! Sir! ... don't pray don't beat me! I have tried to learn Sir; but I can't learn while you and Miss. Murdstone are by.”⁸

The plea of David did not work upon the hardhearted Murdstone. Daily was assigned work and he found himself in the same difficulty. But one day it became unbearable for him and he bit the finger of Murdstone. The rebellious nature of David astonished Murdstone because he did not expect such a response. But after this rebel the anger of Murdstone knew no bounds and he imprisoned David in a room. David remembers that:

“I was a prisoner, the strange sensation of never hearing myself speak; the fleeting intervals of something like cheerfulness which came with it.”⁹

The misery of David did not come to an end after keeping him imprisoned for five days, Murdstones decided to send David to a boarding school, called Salem House. The owner of the school was Mr. Creakle who was a heartless and unsympathetic man. Moreover, he was told by the Murdstones that David was a naughty boy who could bite anyone's finger.

It was a great shock for the child who was declared as a culprit and all the limits were crossed when a notice “take care of him he bites” was tied to his back. All the other boys used to laugh and jeer at him in the school. The head master Mr. Creakle was in the habit of canning the boys for the sheer joy of it. But he was especially cruel to David. David's first meeting with Mr. Creakle was a shock for when he was asked if he knew him and David replied negatively. At this Mr. Creakle told David that very soon he would

know him that he was a tarter. So, neither is the poor child properly treated at home nor is he sent to a proper school. The Salem House is such an institution “where children (were) hunted, flogged, imprisoned but not taught (they) might have been nurtured by the wolf or the bear, so little of humanity had they with in them.”¹⁰

The headmaster has no trace of humanity, and the boys remain thin shadowy figures. The teachers are cold blooded and cruel. They consider children worse than animals, “the institution in David Copperfield manifests itself as a grosser, corset and atrophied development of Murdstone's personality.”¹¹

Dicken gives all the minor details of the brutality of Mr. Creakle. We are told that all the boys in the school were ill-treated and they have a giant like image of their headmaster. In the novel David remembers Mr. Creakle that he was:

“The most ignorant man I have ever had the pleasure to know who was one of the worst tempered men perhaps that ever lived whose business was to make as much out of us and to put as little in to us possible.”(p.79)

M. Creakle was really a brute, who knew nothing about the principles of education. His qualifications did not match with the profession of a teacher. All the time he beat the boys mercilessly. According to David he was expert in the art of slashing the boys. He charged in among the boys like a “trooper and slashing away mercilessly that he knew nothing himself but the art of slashing.” (p.82)

During holidays David could not stay in the school because all the boys were afraid of Mr. Creakle. Nobody could be friendly with David so, it was true that David made them uncomfortable there as a result he stayed at home. But as soon as the holidays were over, he once again moved to school. One day he was given the sad news of the death of his mother. The news was unbearable for David because still he felt the love of his mother. He knew that she was helpless. It was the first time when David felt everything as an orphan

in to the wide world. It was the first time when David felt himself total dejected. It has been rightly pointed out by Barbara Hardy, that David became the victim of “adult cruelty and adult neglect”¹². Nobody could console him and lessen his grief. In the words of David, “No advice, no council, no encouragement, no consolation, no support, from anyone that I can call to mind,” (p.153)

As soon as the procedure of funeral is over Mr. Murdstone gave a clear cut idea to David that he was old enough to earn his living and now he was not able to give him any further education due to poverty. He said, “you will earn enough for yourself to provide for your eating and drinking and pocket money.” (p.147)

When the child leaves the school he goes to the worst work. He has to work in the midst of dirt and squalor, poor David has to slave from morning till night and is paid hardly enough to provide him with two square meals a day. The boys with whom he is made to work are the very scum of the city.

Working under such unhealthy and suffocating circumstances is the worst part of David's childhood. From down to dust he had to take up the job of washing bottles in the firm of Murdstone and Grinsby. David noticed that many empty bottles were lying there and a number of men and boys were employed to wash them. If the bottle ran short then they had to stick the labels on the full ones, or corks, seals and pack in casks. The agony of David was acute and according to him:

“No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk in to this companionship; compared these hence for every day associates with those of my happier childhood ... would pass away from me little by little, never to be brought back again ... danger of bursting.”(p.49)

Only one ray of light for David was the company of Mr. and Mrs. Micawber. According to David Mr. Micawber was an easy going, a good for nothing fellow who earned next to nothing. From head to tail he was in debt and managed somehow by selling his household articles. But one day he had nothing to

survive. As a result he was arrested and put behind the bars in the Marshal Sea prison for debtors. The Micawbers wanted to help David but they were not in a position to give him any help.

Finally the conditions became unbearable for David and he decided to run away. The last ray of hope for David was his only relative, his great aunt Betsy Trotwood. After this strong decision David packed his box and started his journey. But in the very beginning of his journey he was deprived off his money and belongings by the driver of the cart. David was unable to protest. At last he decided to complete his journey on foot. Dickens gives an eyewitness description of the wrong done to David in the following way:

“With last companions gone, David is any body's prey ... on the road to Dover, like bad fathers run mad, he meets all kinds of ogres. A man with a cart drives off with his box and his money, leaving him stranded. Two successive pawn brokers, a mad Murdstone and a mad Creakle, defraud him of his jacket and waist coat, here is a tinker on the road too, who bullies him and steals his neckerchief. Box, money, jacket waistcoat, neckerchief all gone, David is systematically deprived of the outward signs of station in the world.”¹³

At last David was able to find the house of his aunt at Dover after inquiring at several places. He is looking very shabby. In the words of David we come to know that how miserable his condition was,

“My shoes were by this time in a woeful condition ... from head to foot I was powdered almost as white with chalk and dust, as if I had come out of a limekiln. In this plight...I waited to introduce myself to, and make my first impression, my formidable aunt” (DC, p.182-83)

He was looking very shabby and his shoes were almost worn out. He was powdered with dust from head to foot. David knocked at the door of his aunt and he was mistaken as a beggar boy by his aunt Betsy Trotwood. She was shocked when David addressed her by saying aunt and told his tale of woe with the

appeal for help and protection. He told his aunt that;

"I have been slighted and taught nothing, and thrown upon myself, and put to work not fit for me ... I was robbed at first setting out ... I broke in to a passion of crying which I suppose had been pant up with in me all the week." (DC. p.184)

Betsy Trotwood pained to know the miseries of David. She kissed David and decided to adopt him as her own child. She decided to shower all love and affection. She was a kind hearted lady and she treated David kindly. The love and affection worked and David forgot all the hardships he underwent. We are told that Trotwood's behaviour was tender and she was: "the ultimate mother surrogate ... Aunt Betsy ... promptly adopted him as one of the family."¹⁴

On the whole, David has been a very unfortunate child. He had a loving mother but she was a very mild creature, afraid to show her love to her son and he was deprived of parental love partly because of his mother's weakness:

"The disastrous results of his mother's weakness are clearly revealed in David's account of his childhood suffering ... incapable of understanding the child's bewilderment when he finds her remarried, she upbraids him and Peggotty for making her unhappy, when one has the most right to expect the world to be as agreeable as possible."¹⁵

As soon as the mother of David is dead, the little child is left alone and made to face disreputable men all alone. His experiences with his father only add to his miseries. His childhood is worsened with the arrival of the Murdstoned. The Murdstones leave no stone unturned to inflict pain and suffering on the little child he is rebuked and insulted every now and then. David is quite literally treated as a dog. David, says Mr. Murdstone, "If I have an obstinate horse or dog to deal with, what do you think I do?" "I don't know" says David. "I beat him" says Murdstone (DC, p.43)

David loses his mother at an early age

and he loses his nurse Peggotty too. It is then that he feels completely alone and decides to throw himself on the mercy of Betsy Trotwood. David is fortunate enough to get guidance and is adopted by Betsy Trotwood but not all orphans are as fortunate as David. There are, in all, four juvenile orphans and six half orphans. Luck favours David and he gets a home "But for the mercy of God, I might easily have been ... a little robber or a little vagabond" (D.C, p .155).

What a child needs most is love and affection of his parents. David is a fatherless child and his mother has submitted to the wishes of her husband. The result is that the poor child suffers a lot in his childhood, the period of joy and cheerfulness. He is deprived of love, affection; protection, security and proper education which a child needs. He wanders in the streets where he is most likely to be spoiled or starved to death.

"You know what the streets are; you know how: cruel the companions that you find there are; you know the vices practiced there and to what wretched consequences they bring you, even while you are young."¹⁶

Here "David is spoon-fed, coddled and bundled in shading clothes. He has found himself at last."¹⁷ Once he is adopted by Miss Trotwood, all goes well in his life. He gets good education at Dr. Strong's Academy, he finds a sympathetic and affectionate companion in Agnes. Then he falls in love with Dora, daughter of Mr. Spenlow, where he is apprenticed, and marries her. But his beloved wife dies after a short illness and Agnes comes to his comfort and both of them marry and live happily ever after words.

The cruelty at the workhouses and the bitter reality of the factory laws are exposed when David goes to a workhouse at the tender age of ten. He works there from dawn to dusk in the unhealthiest and suffocating environment and is paid only six or seven shillings per week. In this way David was not the only sufferer and victim of the cruel industrialization but thousands of Davids were born and died unknown to the world. Dickens tries to associate himself with the

suffering of childhood. The poor and oppressed childhood fall victim to the criminal designs of the capitalists or become permanently disfigured. He sees men behaving like animals with such poor and oppressed children. Dickens remarks that the cause of this oppression is "neither fate nor the nature, but rather the nature that has been taken out of them."⁶

The cruel flogging of children by their employers robs them of their innocence. Being himself a victim of such cruelty Dickens tries to represent everything that is intolerable. Dickens told Forester about his David Copperfield, that it was a part of the dramatization of his own life, he also remarked that he knew that how all those things worked together to make him what he was.

The general harshness of the age can also be noticed in the cruel treatment of the children at schools. Education is mainly in the private hands. The whole responsibilities of educating children are in the hands of private academies which also provide boarding to the students. The food provided to the children is not sufficient as the academies are run for profit. The boys are mercilessly thrashed even for the least offence by making excuse 'spare the rod and spoil the child'. Institutions like that of Dr Strong in David Copperfield are rare.

References

- I. ¹Dickens, Charles. *David Copperfield* (New York: Washington Square Press; 1958), p. 151.
- II. ²Ibid., p. 35.
- III. ³Ibid., p. 87.
- IV. ⁴Ibid., p. 295.
- V. ⁵Ibid., p. 13.
- VI. ⁶Ibid., p.17-18.
- VII. ⁷Ibid., p. 47.
- VIII. ⁸Ibid., p. 55.
- IX. ⁹Ibid., p. 57.
- X. ¹⁰Ibid., p. 130.
- XI. ¹¹*The Melancholy Man*, p. 72.
- XII. ¹²Barbara Hardy, *The Moral Art of Dickens* (Great Britain Paradigm Print, 1970), p. 128.
- XIII. ¹³ *A Reader's Guide to Charles*

Dickens, p. 123.

XIV. ¹⁴Ibid.

XV. ¹⁵Gwchddyn, B. Needham, "*The Undisciplined Heart of David Copperfield*", in *Nineteenth Century Fiction* (New York: AMS Reprint Company, 1966), p. 88.

XVI. ¹⁶ *The Children of Charles Dickens*, p. 11.

XVII. ¹⁷ *A Reader's Guide to Charles Dickens*, p. 123.