

The Question of Class in Dickens's *Great Expectations*: A Marxist Approach

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Abstract

Dickens' 'Great Expectations' is heavily indebted to Marxist theory. In Marxist ideology 'class' is broadly divided into different categories such as proletariat, bourgeoisie and middle class. Dickens has excellently delineated the divided society with its many aspects. He also presents class consciousness among the chief characters. Class mobility which was a staple in Victorian society is very much apparent in this novel. It demonstrates the corrupting influence of money in modern capitalistic society. Therefore, dehumanisation of men, women, and children by the upper strata of society is a common feature. The author has superbly exposed the evils, injustice and greediness of the upper class. Money manufactures the mentality of the persons concerned. A person from the marginalised position is considered as the 'other'. So, common man dreams to be gentleman even at the cost of his dear and near ones. On the other hand, people from the higher section take the authoritative role. They try to play ducks and drakes with the common people's dream. It is the basic economic practice in the Victorian era which determined the fate and destiny of the characters concerned.

Key words: Marxism, class, capitalism, money, crime, society etc.

From the dawn of civilization man has tried to locate his position and found the basic difference from other people. This tendency is reflected in class structure of society. The more a country prospers in economy, the more difference one can feel in society. In the Victorian era, England observed rapid industrialization in the wake of unprecedented development of science. However, this development led to a new gulf in society. So, one can see rich section of capitalists on one hand and a suffering multitude of have-nots on the other. A nouveau riche section also emerged. They had accumulation of money and thus, they found prosperity in their life. Commercial activities boomed and those became sole nominator of 'class'. Dickens' *Great Expectations* depicts the life-journey of a boy who was brought up 'in hands' by his sister Mrs. Gargery. In this depiction and description of a child's adventurous life Dickens delineates one of the perfect phase of English society. It is a documentary of society. It is a statement of what money can do. It is a record of distinction of 'class'.

'Class' is not a term to be defined easily. This term spreads across a range of disciplines- sociology, politics, cultural studies and 'literary criticism'. To speak broadly, the word 'class' refers to divisions in society. In ancient Greece there was not any word like 'class' where the usual word for such division was *genos* which meant 'race', or merely 'category'. There was early division of the city states in ancient Greece. They were divided into three main groups: *citizens*, *metics* (*resident*, *foreigners*) and *slaves*. Citizens, the majority of whom were farmers, tradesman or artisans, were distinguished from one another by total amount of land they owned or by trade they followed. Citizens were distinguished from *metics* and *slaves* by their entitlement to participate in the state. The division between the various groups of ancient Greek society were based on birth and believed to be divinely ordained to the well-being of the society. There was, then, no class structure in Ancient Greece, but there was societal divisions connected to categories of person, occupation, and wealth. These divisions, moreover, were not seen as harmful but were viewed as the expression of finely balanced society where everyone knows their place.

The word 'class' entered into the English language in the mid-seventeenth century which was a decisive moment in the development of Capitalism. Earlier, there was feudal economy which depended on agriculture. This economy was marked by a series of obligations between landlord and tenant. The Capitalist economy which emerged later was based on manufacture. A purely monetary relation existed between employers and employees. The appearance of the word 'class' is linked to fundamental changes in economy and to their effect on social relation.

In this context of ‘class’ analysis one should give focus on the idea of Karl Marx. Karl Henirich Marx (1818-1883) was a German political, economic, and philosophical theorist and revolutionist. The influence of Marx’s ideas in modern world history cannot be measured. Marxism is a social, economic, political theory derived from the writings of Karl Marx and his followers, notably Friedrich Engels and Vladimir Lenin. Marx’s impact on the world of thoughts has been equally all-embracing, covering sociology, philosophy, economics, and cultural theory. Marxism also spearheaded a rich tradition of literary and cultural criticism. Many branches of modern criticism-including historicism, feminism, deconstruction, post-colonial and cultural criticism-are heavily drawn upon the ideas of Marxism. Marxism itself originated in the philosophy of Hegel.

In Marxist perspective, ‘class’ is a socio-economic essence. The ‘class’ of an individual is determined in relation to the production. Marx and Engels had widely expatiated upon the word ‘class’. But they did not provide any definition on it. Marx has talked about two primary classes. These two are-bourgeoisie and proletariat. Marx was interested in production and distribution of products. He thought that productive materials are controlled by the bourgeoisie class.

Marx attempted systematically to look at the structural causes behind what he saw as a system of capitalist exploitation and degradation, and tried to offer solution to these causes in the sphere of economics and politics. Marx had objection to the capitalism. He understood that one particular class owned all means of production. The bourgeoisie has capitalized on modes of production, and has concentrated property in few hands. Therefore, the oppression and exploitation of the working class goes on incessantly:

In proportion as the bourgeoisie, i.e., capital, is developed, in the same proportion is the proletariat, the modern working class, developed; a class of labourers, who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital. These labourers, who must sell themselves piecemeal, are a commodity. (p. 13, “Manifesto of the Communist Party”)

Marx also infers that the bourgeoisie must necessarily give a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country; the raw material is drawn from remotest zones. The bourgeoisie ‘compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt a bourgeoisie mode of production’. In short, the bourgeoisie ‘creates a world after its own image’. In *Manifesto of the Communist Party* Marx and Engels wrote:

The history of all the hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles (p.14).

At the end of this book Marx firmly writes:

The communist disdains to conceal their wives and aims. They openly declare their ends can be attained only by forcible overthrow of existing social conditions. Let the rulingclass tremble at a communist revolution. (p. 43)

Although Marx intends to give the definition of ‘class’ at the end of Das Capital, he did not mention it. Instead he put a question, -“What constitutes a class?” (p. 862, “Das Capital”). But he speaks of three types of classes in bourgeoisie state -proletariat, bourgeoisie and middle class.

Marx belonged to an age when Dickens gave his outputs. Marx was a great influence in his age. Therefore, it is hardly wondering that Dickens should be influenced by Marx’s basic idea. If we take care in our reading of ‘Great Expectations’ we may have glimpse of Dicken’s use of Marxist tenets. Dorothy Van Ghent in “On Great Expectations” observes:

“Dickens lived in a time and environment in which a full-scale demolition of traditionalvalues was going on, correctively with the uprooting and dehumanization of men, women, and children by the millions-a process brought about by industrialization,colonial imperialism, and the exploitation of the human being as a ‘thing’ or an engine or a part of an engine capable of being used for profit. This was the century of progresswhich ornamented its steam engines with iron arabesques of foliage as elaborate as the anti-massacre and aspidistras and crystal or cut-glass chandeliers and bed-and-feather portieres of its its drawing rooms, while the human engines of its welfare grovelled andbred in the foxholes described by Marx in his capital.” (p.131, “On Great Expectations”)

Dickens was and is and surely will be for a long time to come as a writer catering to the intelligent reader who wants to know everything in the society. He has exposed the abuses, evils, injustices, and greediness in the society of his time. In *Great Expectations*, we can easily identify a plethora of characters taken from multifaceted strata of society, from lower to the upper class. For example, Joe Gargery is a ‘blacksmith’ who lives in the marshy land beside Kent-

In his working clothes, Joe was a well-knit characteristic-looking blacksmith, in his holiday clothes he was more like a scare-crow in good circumstances and everything else.

Nothing that he wore then, fitted him or seemed to belong to him; and everything thathe wore then, grazed him. (p. 22, Great Expectations)

Mrs. Gargery, Pip's sister represents the housewife who thinks herself indispensable to the household and who is constantly nagging at her husband and making too much fuss about little things.

Biddy, Mr. Wopsle's great aunt, is a representative of the marginalised class of society or the 'other'. She represents simple, homely virtues among female characters in the novel. Biddy is a person of wisdom. In each of her encounters with Pip, she calculatively makes the definite point that a gentleman is one who tries to fulfil his place in the world and shows consideration to other.

Mr. Jaggers and Miss Havisham belong to the bourgeoisie class in society. Mr. Jagger is an emissary from that 'high' society. Pip's fondest desire and aspiration is to enter into that society. Pip has glimpse of Mr. Jaggers once at Miss Havisham's house without knowing his original identity. But Pip becomes acquainted with Mr. Jaggers at the local tavern, the Three Jolly Bargemen, where a few customers are peacefully smoking and listening to a theatrical oration from Wopsle. Having reduced Wopsle's audience to terror by his cross-examination of Wopsle, Mr. Jaggers summons the blacksmith and his apprentice and informs them that he is the bearer of a communication. This communication proves to be the turning point in the plot and in the life also. Mr. Jaggers explains to the ashamed Pip that henceforth he can live as a 'gentleman'. It is the assertive Jaggers who became Pip's invisible guardian and not the gentle Joe. Mr. Jaggers is a kind of emanation of the society which Pip has entered:

He washes his clients off as though he were a surgeon or a dentist, by scrubbing his hands in 'scented soap' or wiping them with a towel in a washroom attached to his office.

Miss Havisham, 'the strangest lady' lives at the 'Satis House' alone. He brought up Estella to wreck damage upon the male hearts and 'torn their hearts apart'. Satis house is itself an ironically named symbol of 'unsatisfied appetite'. Once it was the home of a wealthy brewer who married his cook. But it is now the mausoleum of love betrayed twenty-five years ago, turned into hatred of others and the self.

Pip, the narrator-protagonist of the story, is an orphan child who comes across good fortune and enjoys decent wealth. For the first few years he did not have to toil for it. At first, he tries to become a 'gentleman' with liberal education. But he becomes a snob in course of time and begins to look down upon his erstwhile friends and well-wishers. Finally he learns that the source of his good fortune happened to be a convict whom he had helped during his childhood. He, actually a criminal, belongs to the proletariat or lower strata of the society. In chapter X Vol.1, we see that Mrs. Gargery asked Pip to meet Joe after his school hours and

bring him home. So he went to Jolly Bargemen and found Joe smoking his pipe in company with Mr. Wopsle and a stranger. The Stranger gave him some guineas on condition that he should not ask the name of his benefactor.

At the first meeting with Miss Havisham, she informed Joe that Pip had earned a premium and gave them twenty-five guineas. The offer was gracefully accepted by him. The contact with Miss Havisham and Estella brought about sea change in Pip's mind. He started to feel ashamed of the condition of his home and even of his present profession. Once everything at home seemed so beautiful and attractive to him. Then he would feel that by becoming an apprentice to Joe and by leaving his trade totally, he would become distinguished and happy. But now he totally disliked his earlier job as it made him dusty. He felt 'as if a thick curtain has fallen on all his interest and romance...' He however, felt ashamed of himself for this change. Still he could not help himself in any way. He thought to upset Joe by divulging everything to him. He did not run away from Joe and still worked with him because Joe was nice, industrious, amiable, honest fellow. From a distance Estella cast a long-lasting influence on his future life. Often he was haunted by the fear that Estella might at any time find him engaged in his dusty and dirty job. In that case she might despise him without any limit. Thus, there was change in outlook on life after his contact with Miss Havisham and Estella.

The money that actually helped in Pip's rise in social class comes from the 'lowest' or marginalised section of the society. Primarily Pip thought that Miss Havisham was his benefactor. But later, it is revealed that Magwitch, Estella's father was behind his rise. Therefore, he was the real benefactor to Pip. This makes him guilty. He becomes aware of his class. He hated to be loved and bred by a 'criminal'. At the very beginning of the novel Pip watches in gloom as the recaptured Magwitch rowed out to the Buckle out of marshes. Magwitch's grappling with Compeyson is a grotesque version of a ruffianly assault on a gentle person; this suggests bourgeoisie fear of lower class for violence and losing class. Class segregation cannot be practised as rigorously as Pip had hoped; and such faddishness about his previous company is obliterated, in his mind when he realizes that his rise to the status of 'gentleman' is not dependent on the leisured, moneyed Miss Havisham, but on a convict. This convict, he tries to protest, does not belong to a different species from himself:

The abhorrence in which I held the man, the dread I had of him, the repugnance with which I shrank from him, would not have been exceeded if he had been some terrible beast. (p. 315)

Magwitch extenuates Pip's repulsion when he claims that a form of family connection binds them:

Look' ee here; Pip. I'm your second father. You're my son-more to me nor any son.

(315)

In Marxist criticism another class is thought to exist. It is *petty bourgeoisie class*. Little property owners, businessman, small-scale industrialists belong to in this class. In money-centred society, petty bourgeoisie mainly lived in town and are middle and poor class peasants. This class lies between the bourgeoisie and proletariat in relation to the class-structural economy in society. They have close relation with bourgeoisie and the proletariat. According to Marxist literary critics, it is not a permanent class. With the concentration of money, industrialisation and mechanical progress increased. Small-scale production comes to a sudden halt. It comes into the conflict with the profit. Petty bourgeoisie's existence gradually petered out. They cannot cope up with unstable competition with the bourgeoisie. So, a large section of them become penniless. They follow the footsteps of proletariat and ultimately end up becoming proletariat.

An importance instance of petty bourgeoisie class is highlighted through Miss Havisham's episode. It is from Herbert that Pip learns the earlier story of Miss Havisham that she was a 'spoilt child'. The death of her mother while she was only a baby made her father a prosperous country-brewer. He denied her nothing. His proud demeanour was inherited by the daughter along with his riches. A certain young man made love to Miss Havisham. He was no true 'gentleman'. As emphatically mentioned by Matthew Pocket to his son, 'no varnish can hide the grain of wood. The more varnish she put on, the more the grain will be itself'. She also reciprocated the love and in her infatuation parted with huge sums of money to please her lover. It was a matter of tragedy that when Matthew Pocket tried to dissuade her, she dismissed him from her presence. The marriage day was arranged, the wedding dresses were bought, the wedding tour was planned and the wedding guests were invited. She received a letter 'at twenty minutes to nine when she was dressing for her marriage' informing her about the impossibility of their marriage. Therefore, as she was jerked out of her vanity, she stopped all the watches and clocks in the house at that time. She had a bad illness as a result of this thunderbolt-like hit and when she recovers from that illness, she laid the whole place waste.

Another point which comes to the fore is that about Compeyson, the partner of Magwitch-who loved and disappointed Miss Havisham. Thus a lady from the high strata of society was

being harassed and put on the verge of destruction by the criminal Compeyson. Miss Havisham's bitter disappointment has wrecked her happiness, but she had decided to wreck her vengeance upon the male sex of the society which is traditionally considered to be stronger section of the society. With that objects in mind, she rears a little girl, supposed to be an orphan, to whom she gives the name 'Estella' and whom she proposes to use as an agent of her revenge. She wants Estella to grow into a hard-hearted woman incapable of good feeling, any sympathy or pity for any man, and taking a malicious pleasure in arousing a hope and optimism in the heart of everyman who comes into the contact with her. Whenever, Pip goes to Miss Havisham's house, he overhears the whispering into Estella's ears:

Break their hearts my pride and hope, break their hearts and have no mercy! (93)

Judged according to the conventions of Victorian economic practice, Miss Havisham illustrates a significant sort of female failure. Because she wrecks her brewery and refuses to sponsor her female relatives, she blocks her financial capital from circulating within the proper channels of investment and trade, thus rendering it economically barren. Thus, she may see herself as powerful, the owner of Satis House and an authority over Estella. When she takes on each of these powerful roles, she represents the Victorian male figure rather than the female. As Susan Walsh argues:

Miss Havisham, I want to argue, is an important index to the local economics beneath the more a historical fairy tale motifs that structure *Great Expectations* ; she is one of the means by which Dickens demarcates the commercial parameters within each Victorian man operated. (p.1, "Bodies of Capital: *Great Expectations* and the Climacteric Economy")

Dickens lived at a time of unprecedented social upheaval, when impact of the industrialists and the democratic revolution on English domestic life was profound. Dickens shows how much money and gentility, cash and culture, depends on one another. Pip's stay with higher strata in London with ready money available for expenses as well as luxury corrupted him very much. Pip and Herbert joined a club named 'Finches of the Grove' to spend time frolicking there. This led them to debt. He received a letter from Joe who intended to visit him in London. This made him dejected instead of delighted. He had 'considerable mental disturbances, some mortification and a keen sense of incongruity'. Joe's behaviour was judged unreasonably by Pip with the city standards and norms in life. But towards the end, Pip regains a sense of love and deep respect for Joe. Joe, the proletariat, saves Pip the gentleman by paying Pip's debts. He also turned sympathetic towards Magwitch, whose

money helped him to prosper in future. Thus we find another version of Pip- regenerated Pip having the feeling of kindness and sympathy.

G.K. Chesterton put the matter in its right perspective:

When people say that Dickens could not describe a gentleman, what he means is...that Dickens could not describe a gentleman as a gentleman feels a gentleman.

They mean that he could not take atmosphere easily, accept it as the normal atmosphere, or describe that world from the inside...Dickens did not describe a gentleman in the way that a gentleman describes a gentleman...he describes them...from the outside, as he described any other oddity or special trade. (p. 125, Criticism and Appropriation")

Far from endorsing the sense of class division in Pip's mind, Dickens constantly undermines it; he is not concerned to justify Pip's rise in station but rather he analyzes the guilt, the inhibition, and the personal betrayal which this involves. Pip is given economic basis of the genteel life only to discover in the end that he owes it to a man whose whole history and way of life seem a denial of the refinement to which Pip aspires. The greatness of *Great Expectations*, as Lionel Trilling observes, begins in its title:

Modern society bases itself on great expectation which, if they are ever realized are found to exist by reason of a solid, hidden reality. (p. 211, "Manners, Morals and the Novel")

Finally, the reformed and 'reborn' Pip emerges as a true gentleman shaking off his shameful past. He joined as a worker with his friend Herbert. He rejects his life of idleness, sloth and luxury and turns to a worker with a keen respect for 'work'. Pip emerges as a true gentleman. He cannot be called a fake bourgeoisie attempting to gain power and control over other, but as a 'redeemed bourgeoisie'.

In the Victorian society the rapid development of industrialization and commercial activities increased the accumulation of money in the hands of a few middle class people. In Dickens' time the essential or basic requirements of gentility or gentlemanliness was determined not by 'birth' but by 'money'. For instance, Magwitch who is a criminal and a member of the lower strata of the society had easy access to money and intruded upon Pip's way of living motivating him to become a gentleman. It was the corrupting influence of money that urged Pip to abandon his inmates in pursuit of wayward promiscuity. Thus, *Great Expectations* demonstrates that application, perseverance, courage, self-culture, and the dignity of work-not to mention, loyalty, and honesty-bring their own rewards of happiness which do not require the endorsement of material advancement.

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