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Water, the Maternal Matrix of Life in Charles Dickens's Our Mutual Friend.

Abstract: *Our Mutual Friend* is published in 1865. Like all Dickens's work this novel also has the rich and complex pattern of themes & symbols. It is a satire on wealth and its corrupting power in the society. The present study brings out the various dimensions of the element of water in the point of nature, the effect of industrialisation, and other religious views with the help of rich symbols and imageries.

Key Words: River, Water, Symbolises, Purification, Baptism, Meditative power.

Gaffer Hexam, the river finder with his daughter Lizzie Hexam make their life by obtaining the money from the dead bodies of the people in the Thames. Thus water becomes a source of income for them. Water is considered to be the energy of Vishnu. This energy circulates through nature in the forms of river, sap, milk and bread. They are the substances endowed with fluid change. In case of Lizzie the river Thames is anthropomorphised as the mother. It is the duty of the mother to feed her child. Here river Thames acts as a mother not only for Lizzie but also for her family. This is shown through the words of Gaffer when Lizzie refuses to sit near the dead body in water, where he says "As if it wasn't your living! As if it wasn't meat and drink to you!" (45). Gaffer Hexam's livelihood comes from death. In the introduction of the novel *Our Mutual Friend* Dickens says, "What he has in tow is a

corpse, and this Gaffer's bread and butter" (17). In Tony Morrison's *Beloved* with a new born baby in her hand, Sethe crosses the Ohio River, in order to get away from the school teacher and slavery. The boatman rescues her by giving a hot piece of fried eel and gives her some of the Ohio in a jar. The writer has not used the word the river water and she consciously says, Ohio in the jar. The river water here stands for the circulating and life – giving energy which sustains the living things on the lap of the Mother Nature. Similarly in Tagore's *Mukthadhara*, the river Mukthadhara, is anthropomorphised as the mother of the hero, Abhijit, where the immediate mother of Abhijit has left him as a vagrant child on its bank and so Abhijit finds the Great – Mother, Mother – nature in the river.

The river water is also symbolised as the maternal matrix of one's life. The water is the maternal matrix of children who float in the umbilical water of the womb of the mother before they are born. When the mother brings them up by feeding them by milk, food and many other things they enjoy the preserving energy of life. Thus Lizzie gets the motherly energy from the river. Usually the agrarian people would plough the land, irrigate it with water and sow the seed to their livelihood. But in case of Gaffer's everything they get by out sourcing from the river. Gaffer says, "How can you be so thankless to your best friend, Lizzie? The very fire that warmed you when you were a baby was picked out of the river alongside the coral barges. The very basket that you slept in, the tide washed ashore. The very rockers that I put it upon to make a cradle of it, I cut out of a piece of wood that drifted from some ship or another".(45-46)

The moral degradation of the people in England was shown through the river Thames, where the river water is called the moral sewage. This was shown in the investigation of John Harmon's death by the lawyers Mortimer Lightwood and Eugene who move to the house of Gaffer Hexam with Charley, brother of Lizzie Hexam. The house of Gaffer is near the banks

of the river Thames. Thus water provides the predominant constituent for the progression of their investigation.

The wheels rolled on, and rolled down by the Monument and by the Tower, and by the Docks; down by Ratcliffe, and by Rotherhithe: down by where accumulated scum of humanity seemed to be washed from higher grounds, like so much moral sewage, and to be pausing until its own weight forced it over the bank and sunk it in the river. In and out among vessels that seemed to have got ashore, and houses that seemed to have got afloat--among bow-spilts staring into windows, and windows staring into ships--the wheels rolled on, until they stopped at a dark corner, river-washed and otherwise not washed at all, where the boy alighted and opened the door.(163)

The word 'moral sewage' talks volumes of the ills of the industrial England which is shown when they move near the river. Here the word 'down' very often shows how the moral sewage will go down and drown towards the river. In *A God of Small things* the river in the country is polluted beyond words because of the swelling population, the chain of erection of five star Hotels, says of its lost glory. "The river would rouse itself to accept the day's offerings and sludge off to the sea, leaving wavy lines of thick white scum in its wake. Upstream clean mothers washed clothes and pots in unadulterated factory effluents"(125). In another instance when Rahel returns to the river after a gap of so many years what greets her is a river "with a hastily skull's smile, with holes where teeth had been and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed"(124). Ben Jonson in his *Epilogue to Every Man out of his Humour*, mentions about the city's sewage running into the Thames and infecting the purity of its silver waters. In R.K. Narayan's *The Ramayana* which is based on *Kambaramayana*, the first chapter starts with the description of Sarayu, which flows near Ayodhya, the place where Rama, the incarnation of Vishnu is born. The cycle of water is given as

river, sea, cloud, rain and water fall from mountain which washes diamonds and precious stones down its flow. But in the novel *Our Mutual Friend* the flow down is called moral sewage. In this novel, the polluted Thames stands in contrast to the pond in Thoreau's *Walden or Life in the woods*. He says,

It is a mirror which no stone can crack, whose quick silver will never wear off, whose gliding Nature continually repairs' no storms, no dust, can dim its surface ever fresh:- a mirror in which all impurity presented to its sinks, swept and dusted by the sun's hazy brush, this the light dust – cloth, - which retains no breath that is breathed on it, but sends its own to float as clouds high above its surface, and he reflected in its bosom still.(155)

The bondage between the siblings, i.e Charley Hexam and Lizzie Hexam flourished not only by the fire but also by the water. The Thames river not only gives life source for Hexam's family but it also cherishes the relationship between Charley and Lizzie Hexam. They sit by the banks of the river in their childhood days when their father is out of home. Similarly the Vaigai river in Madurai, enriches the relation between Lord Vishnu and his sister Meenaakshi, the Goddess. Alaghar (Lord Vishnu) is not able to arrive to the wedding hall of the time of Meenakshi's wedding with Lord Shiva due to certain reasons. When Alaghar crosses the Vaigai river he gets the information that his sister has got married in his absence. When the married couple comes to Vaigai river to meet Alaghar, he gives all the gifts he brings to the wedded couple in a Mandapam (A small building) in the middle of the river Vaigai. In *The Mahabaratha* Vasudeva according to the words of the Lord, changes the boy-baby born to him for the girl-baby born to Yasoda at Gokulam. Under the divine spell the river Yamuna parts making way for the exchange of the divine infants. Thus the river cherishes the relationship of the siblings though they are born for different parents. In *Our Mutual Friend* Miss Potterson's tavern floats on the river. The place has a romantic set up of

floating on the water. When such ethos is given to a place, the place is a good one for meditation and musing. But in contrast Miss Potterson feels chaotic when the river water touches her feet. Because she hears the conspiracy set by Riderhood against Gaffer. Here the water as a chaos stands in contrast to the water acting as a divine essence in Valmiki's *KambaRamayana*. Rama ends up his incarnation by leaping into the water of Sarayu to be transformed into his divine essence again. In the myth of Ganga, Bhagiratha, a descendant of Sagara induces Shiva with his austerities to allow the sacred river descend to the Earth from Heaven to give resurrection to his ancestors. People come to Miss.Potterson's tavern to forget their sufferings and miseries by intoxication them and making themselves disoriented from the world of nature. The industrialised England makes the people disoriented from the world of nature. In the past rishis get their vibration in the presence of water because they made an inward quest. But the people in the novel make material quest.

On the other hand Dickens gives another dimension for water, where it stands for the process of baptism This is shown in case of Gaffer's death in the river which symbolises his baptism by the river water, where Lizzie says, "Was it you, thus baptized unto death"(222). In biblical allusions John, the Baptist baptises the flock of people from Jerusalem, Judaea and the Jordan in the river Jordan. He says "I baptize you with water as a sin of repentance..." (Mathew 3: 1-2, 4-4). In Hindu mythology the river Ganges is believed to be the celestial river which Lord Shiva bears on his head before it makes its descent. By means of this river Sagara's sixty thousand sons are purified and raised to heaven when they are reduced to heap of ashes by sage Kapila. Similar reference is found in Jeyamohan's short story *River*. The author, who completes the rituals of his dead mother, dissolves her ashes into the river. The act of dissolving or immersing something in water stands for baptism. The sins of his mother are cleansed and her soul gets baptised by dissolving her ashes into the water. Thus in case of Gaffer Haxam, who meets his death in his boat is baptized by the river Thames.

Lizzie feels some mystic vibration in the presence of water. She is unable to separate herself from the river because it brings her solace and comfort inspite of her discomfort situation i.e. the death of her father. A Similarl situation is seen in case of Rabindranath Tagore's *Mukthadhara*, where Abhijit feels the spirit of betweeness in the presence of water. Whenever the day time realities of life die, Abhijit goes in quest of his own essential self. He is drawn to the fall of Mukthadhara. Thoreau in his *Walden or Life in the woods* says about the buoyancy of water. He says, "It is well to have some water in your neighbourhood, to give buoyancy to and float the earth" (71). In Spencer's *Epithalamion and Prothalamion*, the poet refers to the discontents on account of his waiting in the court of the princess for a long time. But standing on the banks of the Thames brings him comfort and solace. Similarly in the short story *River* by Jeyamohan, the authors feels the spirit of oneness in the presence of water. He considers the river as his girl friend in his childhood days. The oneness with the river for the author is shown through the word intimate. Thus in *Our Mutual Friend* Lizzie Hexam's mind is highly intertwined with the flow of Thames.

Water symbolises the unconscious, which comes to help when there is problem in the consciousness. John Harmon after the beastly attack becomes unconscious. He was thrown into the river after the attack. Few minutes later he comes to his consciousness. He says, "it was only after a downward slide through something like a tube, and then a great noise and a sparkling and crackling as of fires, that the consciousness came upon me, "That is John Harmon drowning! John Harmon, struggle for your life. John Harmon, call on Heaven and save yourself! "I think I cried out aloud in a great agony, and then a heavy horrid unintelligible something vanished, and it was I who was struggling there alone in the water"(426). Finally John Harmon guides himself safely before the fierce set of the water; he catches a boat and comes up alive on the other side of the shore. The same concept coincides in Krishna's struggle with a snake Kalinga in *The Mahabharatha*. While fighting with the

snake in the river Yamuna, Krishna loses his consciousness and begins to sink. While immersed in the water, Krishna remembers his divine and infinite nature. With the weight of the Universal consciousness he stood on the snake's head and started dancing. Here the hero gains his expanded divine consciousness through his death-struggle with the monster. Similarly in Tony Morison's *Sula Shadrack*, a shattered man suffers from amnesia and lives in the complexities of the world. He is out of his mind with fear. When she able to see his image reflected in the water in the toilet bowl, his anxiety is calmed and he attempts to create an order in his life. He probed into own personality and regains his identity. Thus in the case of John Harmon, the novel's prime example of fluidity of human personality, is a useful example of how the river serves as the agent for both death and rebirth.

To sum up the significance of water in the words of Roger Peele:

Water is the resolution of intellectual argument, Water is the cancelling of petty difference in one supreme liquid force, Water is the merging of opposites and the annulling of conflicts, but water is also the deep pull of consciousness, easy death. Water is the dissolution of the self in something greater than the self. Water is the great forgiver, the great receiver, the great lover, the great divine element which makes all arguments unnecessary and strife unimportant. (266)

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