

Reflection of French Revolution in Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*

Dr. Kranti Vats¹, Farooq Ahmed²

¹Professor and Head, Department of English, Govt. MVM Bhopal (M.P)

²Ph.D Research scholar in English, Barkatullah University Bhopal (M.P)

Abstract

In the present research paper, the emphasis is on the method Dickens catches the excess of idealism and horror of the revolutionary period of the late 18th century. Although the terrors of the French Revolution have been concealed for present readers by the world wars and killings of the twentieth century, the horror story of Dickens's time were the horrors of the French Revolution. English society is depicted as unsafe but not fatal. Paris and London (opposite cities) Paris and London establish the true heroes of the novel. With the fictionalized description of the events A Tale of Two Cities (1859) is leading up to the birth of the new French Republic. This novel clearly reveals fierceness of authority and gives faultless depiction of the million lost lives by stating that while subjugation will certainly lead to revolution, revolution will lead just as unavoidably to tyranny. Dickens continuously insists upon the worthless terrors of revolution, the injustice, the ever-present terror of scouts and the horrible blood lust of the mob. The portrayals of the Paris mob, for example the gang of murderers struggling to sharpen their weaponries before slaughtering the prisoners in the September massacres outdo anything. These are the dealings in the history of France which form the burning background of A Tale of Two Cities (1859). Its explanation of the French Revolution has powerfully fashioned the British opinions of national identity and political legitimacy.

Keyword: Charles Dickens, French Revolution, Terror, British Society, Paris City, Horrific History, Class Distinctions, Mob Mentality, Peasant Subjugation

1.INTRODUCTION

Barnaby Rudge (1841) was the first historical novel of Charles Dickens in which he recited the story of the Gordon Riots. *A Tale of Two Cities* is another effort at historical fiction by him and French Revolution is his focus. Its portrayal of the French Revolution has strongly designed British opinions of national identity and political legitimacy. The social problem in *A Tale of Two Cities* and its influence on the popular confidence in the solidity of England in the eighteen-fifties is upraised. So, the emphasis here is on the way Dickens arrests the extremes of idealism and horror of the revolutionary epoch of the late eighteenth century. The unfairness of equal treatment for unequal criminalities mirrors Dickens' ever-present concern with social justice, but it hardly associates with the disturbance and inequalities in France. *A Tale of Two Cities* is vital for clarification of the novel, signifying that the contrasting Cities of Paris and London constitute the true heroes in the novel, surpassing the prominence of the foremost characters. So, revolution starts in France and France isn't so distant from England. Actually, circumstances in France aren't that different from circumstances in England. He desired to send a memorandum that the English royalty should have been terrified. Dickens cautions his readers and this warning is lectured not to the British lower classes, but to the royalty. He frequently uses the allegory of sowing and reaping by declaring if the aristocracy continues to plant the seeds of a revolt through acting unfairly, they can be sure of reaping that revolution in time and because of this reason he gives long comparison of two nations at the commencement of the book. While drawing parallels between the two nations, if in the nineteenth century the novel served to sustain the solidity of Britain, in this century it has been significantly

influential in the creation of the popular image of the French Revolution.

2.ANALYSIS

Much of the action of *A Tale of Two Cities* takes place in Paris during the French Revolution, which began in 1789. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens shows how the tyranny of the French aristocracy – high taxes, unjust laws, and a complete indifference toward the well-being of the poor—fed a rage among the commoners that eventually erupted in revolution.

Dickens's outlook on revolutionary violence differed significantly from others. Dickens suggests that the French revolutionaries begin to abuse their power just as much as the nobility did. While the French commoners reason for revolting were entirely understandable, and the French Revolution was widely praised for its stated ideals of "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity", Dickens takes a more pessimistic view by showing how the revolutionaries use oppression and violence to satisfy their own selfish and bloodthirsty desires.

In *A Tale of Two Cities* we see deep distinction between the rich and the poor. While one needs four servants to make his hot chocolate every morning others are on their hands and knees in the street to lick up drops of spilled wine, are left with nothing but onions to eat and are forced to starve. Every time the nobles refer to the life of the peasants it is only to destroy or humiliate the poor. With his depiction of a broken wine cask outside Defarge's wine shop, and with his portrayal of the passing peasants trying to drink the spilling wine, Dickens creates a symbol for the desperate quality of the people's hunger. This hunger is both the literal hunger for food—the French peasants were starving in their poverty—and the metaphorical hunger for political freedoms.

Dickens deeply sympathizes with the plight of the French peasantry and emphasizes their need for liberation. Although Dickens condemns this oppression, however, he also blames the peasants strategies in overcoming it. The peasants could not get appreciation of reader by fighting cruelty with cruelty. They only intensify the violence that they themselves have suffered. Dickens makes his position clear while giving descriptions of the mobs with deep aversion. Though Dickens sees the French Revolution as a great symbol of

transformation and resurrection, he emphasizes that its violent ways were completely antithetical and immoral. The French Revolution began as a critique of the aristocracy; as Dickens demonstrates, however, the "classless" formation of the new French Republic becomes another form of class violence. Someone is always in power. And the powerless always suffer. As the poor of France take to the streets, they fire a bloody and violent revolution. Blood runs through the streets of Paris, entire families depend on new and unjust laws, and no one can be sure of their future in the first years of the New Republic. Throughout the novel, Dickens approaches his historical subject with some ambivalence. While he supports the revolution, he often points to the evil of the revolutionaries themselves. Righteous, justice-seeking people turn out to be bloody murderers.

Dickens's novel explores the complicated relationship that emerges between the political and the social consequences of revolution. In *A Tale of Two Cities* Dickens suggests that whoever is in power, nobles or commoners will use their power in cruel ways and forget the reasons that brought them to this position.

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, the French Revolution is a prime mover of plot. The novel begins with this, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" (*A Tale of Two Cities*, p 1). This is set against the backdrop of the French Revolution. The revolution began in 1789 with the attack on the notorious prison, the Bastille—a key event in *A Tale of Two Cities*. For the historical background of *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens relied on a massive history of The French Revolution written by his friend Thomas Carlyle. Many incidents in the novel are based on real life occurrences described by Carlyle. Dickens was also influenced by Carlyle's belief that the revolution was inspired by the centuries of cruelty and poverty the French poor had to endure at the hands of the corrupt nobility Dickens depicts this process most clearly through his portrayal of some of the events of French Revolution, such as the storming of the Bastille, the senseless fury of the mob and the Reign of Terror. The guillotine, a machine designed to behead its victims, is one of the enduring symbols of the French Revolution. The Bastille and Guillotine are the only historical facts in the novel but as a skilled novelist Dickens reveals how these facts or incidents influenced the individuals who were not related to the revolutions, as we observe in the

case of Doctor Manette, whose family was completely shattered due to it.

Many contemporaries identify the features of the "Ancient Regime" as being among the causes of the Revolution. Economic factors included hunger and malnutrition in the most destitute segments of the population, due to rising bread prices, after several years of poor grain harvests. Bad harvest rising food prices, and an inadequate transportation system that hindered the shipment centers contributed greatly to the destabilization of French society in the years leading up to the revolution.

Another cause was the state's effective bankruptcy due to the enormous cost of previous wars, particularly the financial strain caused by French participation in the American Revolutionary war. The social burdens caused by war included the huge war debt, made worse by the loss of France's colonial possessions in North America and the growing commercial dominance of Great Britain. France's inefficient and antiquated financial system was unable to manage the national debt, something which was both partially caused and exacerbated by the burden of an inadequate system of taxation. These demographics had an enormous impact both inside and outside France.

The novel has not shown any characters who may become the brilliant people of France who will make their country rise from "this abyss" in the future. Dr. Manette comes closet; he has suffered the evils of both the ancient regime (a term referring to the rule and the way of life in France before the revolution) and revolutionary France, but his future is clearly with his daughter and son-in-law in England. None of them is likely to return after their escape, not only because it will be politically unwise, but also because a happy and safe future awaits them in England, as Carton prophesies: "I see the lives for which I lay down my life, peaceful, useful, prosperous and happy in that England which I shall see no more" (A Tale Of Two Cities, p 306).

The future awaiting the "villains of the piece", on the other hand, is death in France. In the penultimate chapter of the novel, Madame Defarge, who has been driven by a desire to see each and every descendant of the Evremonde family executed, dies by accidentally shooting herself in a struggle with Miss Pross, Lucie's

faithful maid. Although the deaths of the other "villains" are not narrated directly in the novel, Carton foresees their fate on the guillotine:

"I see Barsad, and Cly, Defarge, the Vengeance, the Juryman, the Judge, long ranks of the new oppressors who have risen on the destruction of the old, perishing by this retributive instrument [the guillotine], before it shall cease out of its present use" (A Tale of Two Cities, P 310).

It is interesting to note here that Carton's list contains not only those French characters associated with the Revolution, but also two English characters, Barsad and Cly. Their careers as spies have finally brought them to Paris, where they work for the revolutionary French government. The pattern is one of poetic justice: the characters who have been depicted sympathetically will end up in England, whereas the villains, both French and English, will finally pay for their crimes on the guillotine in France.

It is a commonplace of Dickensian criticism that the writer was influenced by Carlyle's *The French Revolution* in *A Tale of Two Cities*. And yet, Dickens's outlook on revolutionary violence differed significantly from that of Carlyle. As Irene Collins points out, Dickens "dislikes the violence of the revolutionaries, both in its popular form (the mob) and in its institutionalised form (the Terror). Unlike Carlyle, he can no longer see justice in the violence" (Collins 53). Moreover, it is Dickens's novel, rather than Carlyle's history, which is responsible for the popular image of the French Revolution in England in our century. *A Tale of Two Cities* promoted the image of a stable England by using revolutionary France as a setting to highlight the contrasts between the two countries, although Dickens seemed to believe in the eighteen-fifties that England was heading towards an uprising on the scale of the French Revolution.

3.CONCLUSION

The current research paper reveals that how Charles Dickens has explored human sentiments and responses that aren't specific to any one historical event. Dickens gives the readers a whole image of the French revolution with all its fear and human actions. Throughout the novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, fairness was served. Their

activities may have been a little severe, because of the fact that the only fair penalty at the time of the Revolution was death. The nature of Justice as illustrated in the novel shows how justice can take numerous forms. It can be to avenge a family member, like in the case of Madame Defarge and Gaspard, or it could be to settle the score regarding something said or done. This shows that justice has changed all the time, however, the central features have stayed the same, and the ultimate aim is to get back what you think is right and fair. As Dickens wrote:

“Crush humanity out of shape once more, under similar hammers, and it will twist itself into the same tortured forms. So, the same seed of rapacious license and oppression over again, and it will surely yield the same fruit according to its kind” (A Tale of Two Cities, P 362).

Even though *A Tale of Two Cities* is a main social critique, it's also an exploration of the limits of human justice. In fact, what is the subject "Justice" means exactly? Is it damaging people who damage you? Or is it jailing people linked to those people? When does Justice start becoming injustice? These are large queries. And they are still applicable these days.

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