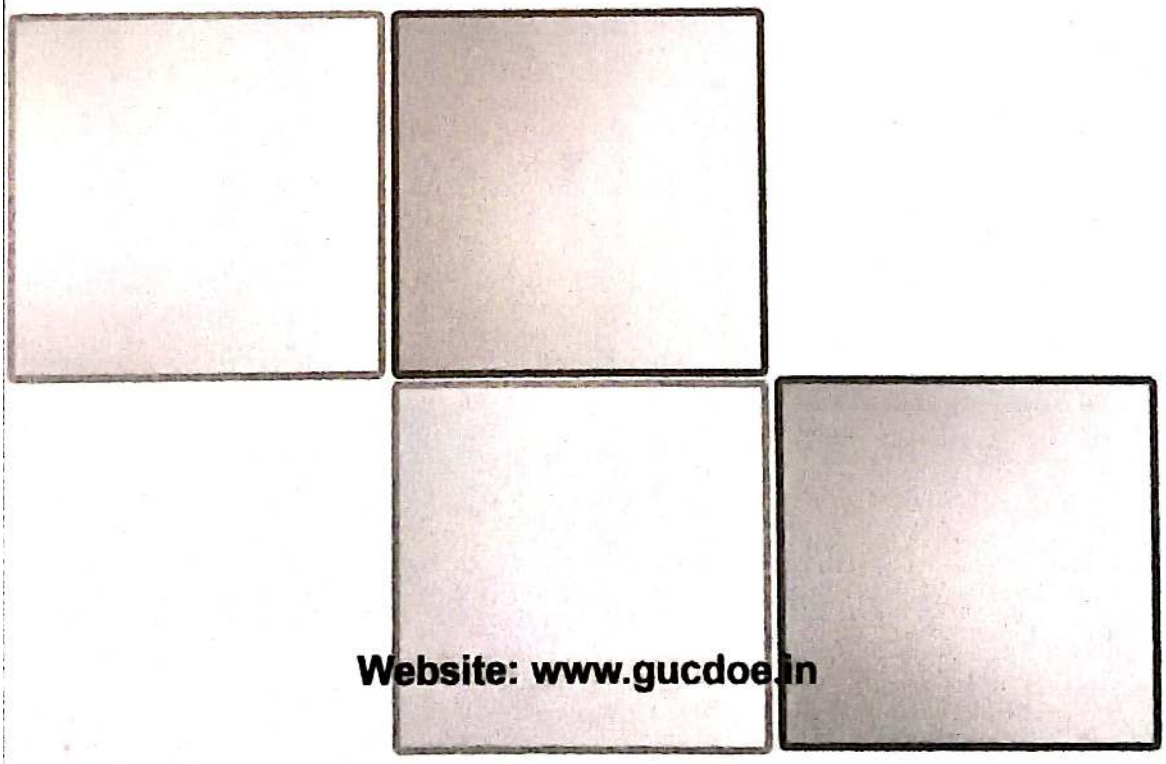
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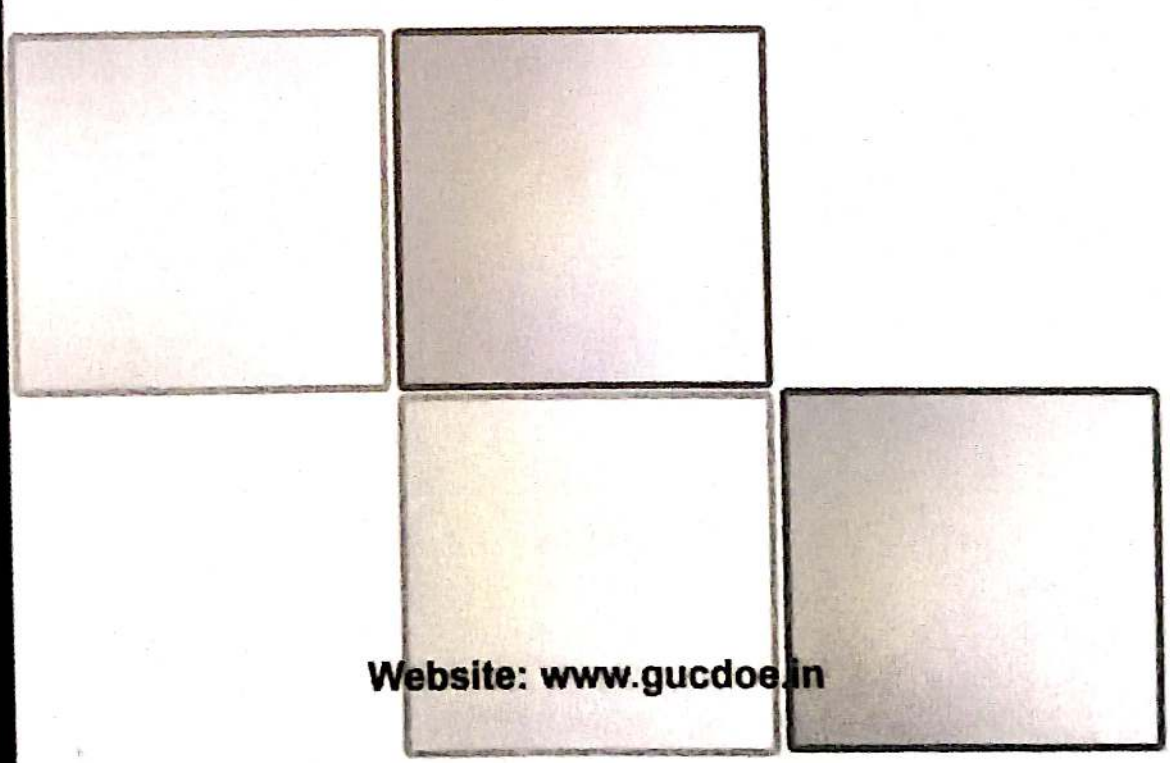
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Unit 4 : Charles Dickens: *Oliver Twist*

Introducing the novel

Learner's Space

Unit Structure:

4.1 Objectives

4.2 Introduction

4.3 What happens in *Oliver Twist*

4.4 The Characters

4.5 Minor characters

4.6 Summing Up

4.7 References and Suggested Readings

4.1 Objectives

This unit will introduce the readers to the novel *Oliver Twist.* The discussion should begin by familiarizing you with some points of view to be kept in mind while reading any piece of fiction. After this general approach we shall move on to the text here.

This unit has been prepared to

- *assist* you in reading the novel
- *make* you acknowledge the novel in its totality of plot, character and structure
- *enable* you to assess all the characters in relation to the proceeding of the events, and
- *make* you recognize those characteristics in the novel which make Dickens so remarkable in his writing.

4.2 Introduction

Preparing to read about any of Dickens' novels is a pleasure in itself. It will definitely bring in that enthusiasm and vigour that we go on to think of all the myriad shades found in his characterization and unique narratives. Dickens

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is full not only in quantity but definitely also in quality. Each of his novels presents a specific world of the English life during the Victorian era. As Dickens was conversant with the nooks and corners of the London city, he was able to know most of the trades and the types of people associated with such varied occupations and their kinds of life.

Dear learners, can you imagine what kind of sensibilities will grow in a child who had to suddenly dump himself in such unparalleled horror of life? Will every such child sustain his or her mental abilities and human sensibilities and regular rational existence? We shall surely let us to know after reading this novel.

When Dickens was forced to replace his schooling by becoming a factory worker and experience a temporary phase of orphanhood he gracefully digested everything that came to him from life. He was bullied by elder paupers while working in the factory; he had to skip meals, face indignation, hostility and suffer hardships which were all imposed in abundance. His entire life was haunted by the memories of these tedious moments. The initial chapters of *Oliver Twist* narrate the horrific atmosphere of the workhouses and the parish. Now when his parents were released from the debtors' prison Dickens could return to his formal schooling, although he did not pursue much of higher education, he learnt shorthand that helped him a lot in collecting enormous information and materials for his future novels. At a very young age he took up the work as a law clerk which eventually also forwarded him towards becoming a journalist. His foray into journalism helped him to keep track of the various crimes and other anti social happenings in the city of London which had been turning into a highly commercial hub for industrial upgradation. The London society was profuse with diversity and abundance of raw materials for Dickens to create his characters and plots.

If we look at the Victorian England of the time, it was in a position where literature was waving at writers from all genres to exemplify their talents and art in all possible ways. At the level of poetry Tennyson, Arnold, the Brownings were representing the age in their voices with the depiction of both the matters of celebration as well as those of condemnation. Poems like "*Ullysses*" and "*Dover Beach*" expressed the true spirit of the age. In prose authors like Ruskin, Arnold and Newman were busy writing realistically about the philosophical foundations of the time. It must not be overlooked that although the Queen had been valorizing the obvious developments in the society and the progress in the quality of human life, underneath were many such

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observations which were not brought to the fore by all writers in the true form. While the preceding Romantic age was full of imagination and lyricism presenting the lighter side of human life, the Victorian age could not be available in the same spirit of solitude and fanciful ideas. The Victorian age was one of deep thought, compromise and struggle to survive; it was devoid of the spirit of escape which was comfortably made vibrant by the literature of the preceding age. Darwin's book *The Origin of Species* is a prominent specimen of the scenario of that age. The complexities that were thrust upon the people by the Industrial Revolution, the widening social marginalization and the advent of various rights and laws led to the awareness of the common man about everything around them. The development of various writings like periodicals, journals and magazines discussed the new facts and information of the scientific line of thought began to shake the Church's position and make the public more and more informed about their lives and rights. The growth of literacy led to the unprecedented rise in readership which eventually turned out to be the factor behind the success of writers. Hidden under the shining walls of the palace and the decorative churches were the poor and needy people who were let down by the so called developmental ventures. The capitalist systems left nothing for them and they were left on the streets starving and at the mercy of the systems like the workhouse. Besides this, there were many social evils in which women were made victims to suffer in the name of morality and family bindings. In short, the Victorian age was not only prosperous but also full of problems which were discussed by the writers of all genres, especially the novels.

As far as Dickens is concerned, his manner of introducing us to the subject matter of the novel is unique; he does not use the name of any city or location to begin the story, he merely lets us know that a child was born in a workhouse followed by the demise of the mother the next moment. The poignant point to note here is the indication as to what notoriety this orphan might have to face in its life to come, the hard fact being that it was left in a workhouse- a kind of curse to the poor and the homeless. Besides, Dickens' use of language must be applauded when he satirizes such charitable establishments in a stark grim language wrapped in his wit. The children in the workhouses lived so miserably that they were not even taught the basic etiquettes of Christianity, let alone other good ways of becoming a better civilian of the nation. When Oliver was asked by the board members whether he prayed at night like a good Christian and thanked the people who took care of him, the child stammered to say "yes, sir". Dickens narrated the scene sarcastically so:

Learner's Space

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Learner's Space

"The gentleman who spoke last was unconsciously right. It would have been *very* like a Christian, and a marvelously good Christian too, if Oliver had prayed for the people who fed and took care of *him*. But he hadn't, because nobody had taught him."

The idea of taking care and allowing anything

The way in which he describes the feeling of the events and especially the detailed appearances of the characters is simply commendable.

4.3 What happens in *Oliver Twist*

The birth of the child without any solid knowledge about his fatherhood (or parenthood, so to say) and his mother's death in no time imposes upon it a life of punishment and forced labour combined with a half fed stomach. Dickens almost directly points towards the negativity and doomed life of the children in the workhouses during the Victorian England. The child was born too feeble in a pitiable circumstance as the mother was so sick that she succumbed to death immediately after its birth. The newborn was in such a condition that its survival seemed doubtful to the surgeon and the old lady attending on her. Dickens describes its condition as such: "..he lay gasping on a little flock mattress, rather unequally poised between this world and the next: the balance decidedly in favour of the latter". The beadle Mr. Bumble gave him the name Oliver Twist based on a peculiar alphabetical formula of naming orphans born in that workhouse, the christening based on chance. The manner of beginning the account of this boy's life lends an ominous sense of future that is going to be imposed upon its very existence. The children survived by consuming some gruel.

The next nine years Oliver spent in utter malnutrition and utter lack of humanity under the care of an elderly lady Mrs. Mann who was adept in the wrong use of the fund allotted to her by the parish authorities for taking care of the orphans. She used the fund received from the parish authorities to fulfill her ends allowing the children to remain undernourished and unhealthy.

One day Mr. Bumble come to Mrs. Mann's place to take Oliver with him as he has already completed nine years and now too old to be in that place now. Besides, no information of his parents could be found till then by the higher authorities which is why he is to return to the house where he was born. The shrewd lady pretends to be just the opposite of what she had been all these years to the little child. Although Oliver is faintly relieved to get rid of

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Mrs. Mann, he unknowingly feels some pain to leave behind all his inmates who were his only source of recognition and sustenance. Dickens feels the loneliness of Oliver in the following words:

"Wretched as were the little companions in misery he was leaving behind, they were the only friends he had ever known; and a sense of his loneliness in the great wide world, sank into the child's heart for the first time."

Now comes the hardest part of Oliver's life. Where he has landed upon would now be a nightmarish experience to him. Food, was denied most cruelly by the master of the workhouse kitchen. The children were so ill fed that they grew slightly rebellious and they plan to ask for more food. The plan sportingly follows so that the turn falls on Oliver to ask for more. And this such an incident that the entire workhouse is shaken by the request for a second serving. Oliver's words "please sir, I want some more" disturbs everyone as though more than an earthquake has destroyed the establishment or killed some people rightaway. Dickens amuses us with his description of the horrible situation thus created by Oliver that rendered the fat healthy master pale and clueless: "the assistants were paralysed with wonder, the boys with fear." It didn't take much time for the beadle to inform the matter to the higher authorities and next for Oliver to be imprisoned in a solitary room. As advertised about the availability of Oliver for apprenticeship, a chimney sweep namely Mr. Gamfield comes to get him as a sweeper. Oliver is summoned from his confinement by Mr. Bumble and taken to the magistrate for approval of the deal. Owing to his rough behavior Gamfield is not much approved of by the old gentlemen, especially after they closely notice the terrified pale face of the child. The magistrates order the beadle to show kindness to the boy which he is badly in want of.

Learner's Space

SAQ

Q1. Write a note on the never ending hardships of Oliver Twist. (50 words)

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Q2. What idea do you form of the people he was surrounded by? (50 words)

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Learner's Space

The people of the workhouse want to get rid of Oliver now, also because he has been a cause of trouble for them asking for more food or crying about his turmoil staying there. Now they are trying to send him to the sea on some trading vessel so that he may eventually die of cold or hunger or torture. But in the meantime, Mr. Bumble happens to meet an undertaker Mr. Sowerberry and bargains with him on the price of taking in Oliver as an apprentice. Sowerberry tries to show as if he is all in trouble as he does not have much to provide for his family because he is not making much profit in his trade. Finally Oliver is brought to be sent with this coffin maker. While bringing him to his new destination, Mr. Bumble taunts him bitterly, calling him the most ungratefullest and the worst disposed boy ever. Pained by everything he pleaded to be good and cried bitterly saying, "So lonely, sir! So very lonely. Everybody hates me. Oh! sir, don't pray be cross to me." Oliver was received by Mr. Sowerberry and then handed over to Mrs Sowerberry. She calls Oliver very small to which Bumble saids that he would grow up. The cranky lady is not at all fond of children, her opinion is that parish boys are more costly to keep than their worth. Oliver offered some food discarded by the dog, but there is some trace of meat in it, the ever starving child desperately devour upon it. At this point Dickens has deliberately tried to show the bare faced living conditions in which the poor people were made to live while working in factories or other establishments. Poverty, ill sleeping arrangements, hunger were the only things one could think of in these places. But at the same time, the character of Oliver has been hardened enough to bear all the trouble and disgust silently; once he is inside Mrs. Sowerberry's place, he puts up a brave face to go through everything to come.

Owing to his melancholy appearance, Oliver is appointed by the Sowerberrys as a hired mourner at the funerals. In this task he could witness the extremities of human materialism, vices and hypocrisy. But he does his work diligently and earns his master's liking. This, in turn, makes him enemies of Noah- a senior apprentice and also Mrs. Sowerberry. One day Noah, Charlotte and Mrs. Sowerberry instigates Oliver that he has to resort to aggressive behavior. When Bumble and Mr. Sowerberry were called, the latter mercilessly beat Oliver and he is punished without any fault of his. Next morning Oliver walks out and leaves the place for good; he does not know his destination but heads towards the city.

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SAQ

Q1. Describe briefly Oliver's turmoil while he is apprenticed with the Sowerberrys? (75 words)

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Q2. Sketch the character of Mrs. Sowerberry. (40 words)

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Q3. Why is Noah jealous of Oliver? How does he take revenge upon the latter? (20+30=50 words)

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Learner's Space

With a penny in his pocket, a clean shirt and two pairs of stockings with him Oliver walks more than a hundred miles to reach near London and he hopes nobody would be able to find him out in his new destination. He suffers extreme levels of hardship for seven days without food and money until he meets a queerest looking boy name artful Dodger who treats Oliver with food and drink and promised to take him to a gentleman who would offer free food and lodging to the homeless. At nightfall the two boys head towards London and eventually enter a filthy and noisy street to go and meet the red haired repulsive Jew Fagin. A few small boys are mysteriously smoking like elders. After having some food and hot drink, Oliver falls fast asleep. While waking up, Oliver sees Fagin with some valuables in a box. He is then threatened to remain silent about this. In the next few days that Oliver stays in Fagin's place, he is trained by the gang how to pick pockets but he did not know he too would have to do that.

One fine day Oliver is sent to a street where the Dodger picks the pocket of an old gentleman and hands over to Bates. Oliver is so puzzled and terrified that he simply starts running too. The mob takes Oliver to the police and then to a courtroom where the old gentleman whose pocket was picked comes. The moment he looks at Oliver, he starts to think about someone's strange

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Learner's Space

resemblance to Oliver's face, but he can not recall. On the other hand, Oliver is set free when the bookstall owner comes running to say that he is innocent.

Stop to Consider

Dickens presents before our eyes a concrete picture of the criminal attitude of the gang members and the ferocious manner in which the mob chased the little boy. Dodger and Bates are so adept in the trade that they successfully could divert the public towards Oliver amidst all the hue and cry. The details provided to us are a special mastery of Dickens that we get the exact idea of the criminals' demeanour and their depth of anti- social activities.

Oliver is so shocked by the sudden events that he can not move and Mrs. Brownlow then takes him to his house and his attendant Mrs. Bedwin takes care of the boy for several days. Finally Oliver gets well and feels happy to be safe. Mr. Brownlow comes to the conclusion that the portrait hung on his home wall was a carbon copy to the countenance of Oliver.

Stop to Consider

While depicting the torments of the poor people we can also read the narrative accounts by Mark Twain- a towering figure in the world of literature. There is a famous quote by Twain revealing his sarcastic attitude towards the evils of the society:

"When the rich rob the poor; it's called business. When the poor fight back, it's called violence"

- The Apocryphal Twain

Inside Fagin's gang, there is going on disturbing arguments about the incident when arrives Bill Sikes- a well built rowdy youth with fearful appearance. They decide to find out what happens to Oliver after the incident. Nancy and Bet are sent to the police as relatives of the boy and finally they find out the address of Mr. Brownlow. At Brownlow's place, again, Oliver is happy to get the care, love and new clothes to wear. In the meantime, Brownlow's friend Mr. Grimwig visits the latter and tries to stain the impression about Oliver. Although Brownlow is unshaken about the innocence of Oliver, he consents to test the boy and sends him to the bookstall with some valuable

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books. It is again so unfortunate with this miserable child that he is caught by Fagin's gang while he is making his way to the stall. He is tortured by Fagin when Nancy comes to rescue and support for her. Dickens has drawn these incidents to bring out a picture of the London at that time and the evidence of the terror stricken criminal world which was so deep rooted that it seemed really difficult to identify and uproot them. It is also interesting to note that the thieves in such groups do not seem to enjoy their bold adventure, but they seem to remain threatened by the fear of the police and law. This is evident when no one from Fagin's group is ready to visit the police to seek information about Oliver.

In a transitional chapter 17 is found little Dick on the verge of death from malnutrition who wants to bless his loved mate Oliver. Mr. Bumble gets an advertisement in the newspaper about a reward of five guineas to anyone who would provide any information about Oliver and his history. He immediately lands at Brownlow's house and gives such a demolishing impression of Oliver as a malicious and harmful creature that whatever kind feelings were in Brownlow towards the child is vanish in a moment. It is Mrs. Bedwin who still didn't believe that Oliver is treacherous.

While in Fagin's gang, all are trying to convince Oliver about the charms of the criminal life. They all try to engage him in at least in one criminal act so that after it he would continue in the fear of being caught by the police, this time Nancy too is with them. Finally with the help of a villain Sikes and a Toby, Fagin decides to send little Oliver to a robbery where only a little child was required to enter the house. It must be noted here that although Nancy wanted to help Oliver, she is terribly afraid of her masters. This is the reason why she consents to bring Oliver to William Sikes.

Stop to Consider

Oliver is repeatedly being torn apart by the evil and immoral people in the novel. He neither gets the opportunity to set himself free from such clutches nor is he mature enough to show more courage. What can be said about such groups where naïve and innocent children were 'trained' to become thieves or pickpockets? Consider the following.

Another horrible journey starts for Oliver with Sikes, they go on walking long distances through streets and localities, some parts are travelled on cart.

Learner's Space

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Learner's Space

Oliver is dismayed by dejection and also by the fear of being murdered this time. They eventually reach an old house which is Toby Chitling's lodging. Oliver is forced to drink and to fall asleep. At midnight they wake him up and begin their expedition, only when they reach the destination and climb up a house that Oliver understands what is actually going on. He cries out helplessly to let him go but they threaten to kill him. Next moment they pull him up and send him in through a window to the hall of the house so that he can open the main door for them to enter. But the naïve child steps on the floor to only wake up the people of the house. One of the servants fires at Oliver and injures him. At this, the two criminals run away carrying Oliver but later they leave the wounded boy in a ditch.

The next scene shifts to the workhouse where Mr. Bumble is flirting with the ageing Mrs. Corney, the matron, over a cup of tea. Suddenly an old lady informs that Old sally, a pauper at the place now but once was a nurse, is extremely sick and wants to say something before dying. Mrs. Corney runs to Old Sally complaining about the cold on her way. Sally is near death but somehow requests for privacy and then tells Corney that ten years back a woman came there and gave birth to a boy and died immediately. Before dying she had handed over a gold neckpiece to Old Sally so that her child would be taken care of with that price. But Sally had stolen that gold ornament. The dying woman discloses that the boy is named Oliver, but she fails to give the whereabouts of the gold and passes away.

Fagin is seen to be immensely interested in Oliver as he thinks the boy can help him make progress in his trade. He is horrified to learn about the failure of the robbery and most worried about losing Oliver. He sets out to the streets to search for the boy and see if he is alive.

Stop to Consider

The London city is described with details of the different types of shops in several lanes and streets with their deceitful looks. The extended size of this city copes with the endless prospects of crimes and the authority's deaf ear to such common incidents as the one that took place with Oliver. There were pubs and such recurring hubs where criminals could meet and execute their actions, in one of these spots could be now found Monks- another villain of the novel who wants to convert Oliver into a criminal so that the family estate could be his alone. It becomes confusing

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for the readers at this point as to what is actual intention of not killing Oliver but only turning him into a criminal.

Learner's Space

Oliver wakes up on a wet morning to find himself in pain with the wounded arm. With some effort he gets up and starts walking only to find out that the direction is towards the house where they had gone to rob. But he is so weak that he can manage to go nowhere for his life. When the servants scream that the robber had returned, the ladies Rose and her aunt Mrs. Maylie take him in to be taken care of. The mature lady is not assured of the boy's innocence but her niece feels the goodness and helplessness of Oliver.

SAQ

Q1. Comment on the crime scenario of London city presented through the gang of Fagin. (50 words)

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Q2. Describe the psychologial condition of Oliver after he was forced to the robbery and then left in the ditch with a bullet wound. (40 words)

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It seems that Dickens has, by this time, decided to put aside the miseries of Oliver and turned the events to show a striking reverse of the boy's fortune from the ditch to the Maylies' humane concern and care from many more people including the doctor. Rose opines that such a small child can never be a robber as he is so miserable and fragile, and looks being denied of a decent family life to support him. Dr. Losberne says that often thieves scare such helpless children to be used in their wrong acts. In the mean time, police officers come to investigate the burglary but the ladies and Dr. Losberne succeed in making the officers believe in the innocence of Oliver in the failed robbery. Thus, Oliver's luck seems to favour him this time leaving him in a good living condition never experienced before.

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Learner's Space

In these happy circumstances Oliver narrates everything about his life to the ladies and the doctor. Next they together leave to meet Mr. Brownlow at his London residence, but they are utterly disappointed to learn that Brownlow had left for West Indies after selling everything in London. Oliver feels absolutely distraught not to have found Brownlow to tell him the truth as to why he cannot return from the book stall and how he is caught by the thieves. Sadly they come back to the countryside where Oliver begins to live happily with the two ladies. These happy moments are disrupted by a sudden illness of Rose but she recovers soon. A new character Harry comes to Mrs. Maylie's house and we learn that he is Mrs. Maylie's son. He soon falls in love with Rose and conveys to his mother his desire to marry her. His mother is not eager to support him and tells him to reconsider his wish because the doubtful circumstances linked to Rose's birth may later create obstacles in this relationship. There is a romantic consideration at this point amidst the excessive tension which is recurrent in the novel. Harry is madly in love with Rose and cannot express it to his mother pathetically: "I have considered! Mother, I have considered, years and years. I have considered, ever since I have been capable of serious reflection. My feelings remain unchanged, as they ever will; and why should I suffer the pain of a delay in giving them vent,.." Meanwhile, Oliver is again frightened by two men near the window of his table when he is only at a short distance from being caught by the Jew and a second one. He is aghast with fear and cries for help, he is saved though by the kind inmates whom he had been living with.

Back in the workhouse where Mr. Bumble and Mrs. Corney are now married, they quarrel and eventually the wife forcefully drags bumble out of the house. While walking in the streets, he encounters Monks, the strange character who demanded some information about Oliver's history. Bumble takes him to Corney (now Mrs. Bumble) where everything is revealed that Old Sally stole the ornament from Oliver's mother but mortgaged it to a shop in need of money. Later, Mrs. Bumble finish the receipt from Sally and collects the ornament from the shop after paying the due amount. Monks threatens the couple and takes the ornament and throws it in the running water and leaves the spot.

A sick Sikes is visited by Fagin to give him some drink, but Monk angrily demands money which Fagin didn't have at that time. Fagin Jays he would go to his lodging and send some money in Nancy's hand. At his lodging suddenly appears monks and demanded to tell some secret to Fagin. While these two

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are discussing the secret about Oliver's parentage and their plan to harm him, Nancy overhears them. She resolves to do something to thwart the evil intentions of monks and save Oliver. She gives the money to Sikes and waits till he is asleep. The next moment she is crazily running on the streets to meet Rose Maylie to inform her about the evil plans of her gang members. She somehow meets and everything to her and promises to meet at the London Bridge at a particular time. Rose is overwhelmed to see the goodness in Nancy and promises to help her if needed. Just then, Oliver comes running to Rose and tells her that he saw Mr. Brownlow in a carriage and entering a particular establishment the address of which he has noted down. The two hurriedly go to meet Brownlow and narrate everything to the kind hearted man. Oliver is extremely glad to have revealed his truth to the man who once took such good care of him. Rose and Brownlow also discuss the impending danger to Oliver's life. All the well wishers get together to help Oliver out of the danger and to hand over the criminals to police. Brownlow adds that that they need to be careful because they must first get to know the secret about Oliver's parentage so that he can inherit his father's property. Besides, Nancy's name should not be revealed as she might be in danger too.

The next scene shows Noah and Charlotte running away to London after stealing money from their masters- the Sowerberrys. While staying in a public house for safety, they meet Fagin and are tempted to join his gang. On the other side, Dodger has been caught by the police and now he faces a trial in the court and is given imprisonment. Fagin comments at this point that in their trade they must save themselves. When Nancy tries to go out to meet Rose and Brownlow, Sikes asks her repeatedly where she is going. Nancy replies she is simply going out. Fagin too is there. Sikes and Fagin suspect Nancy of something. Sikes then beats her mercilessly for being adamant.

Noah's first task for Fagin is to keep a strict watch on Nancy. Henceforth, he begins to follow her everywhere. Nancy meets Rose and Brownlow and they have an important conversation. Everything is overheard by Noah who then goes to report it to his master. At his lodging, Fagin is in a strange mood lying beside Noah. Just then Sikes arrives aggressively to handover some papers. He is irritated to see Fagin so grim. Then Fagin wakes up Noah to narrate everything about Nancy. After hearing of Nancy's meeting with the people, Sikes gets infuriated and misunderstands that Nancy has betrayed him. While Fagin advises him to handle the situation with care and not harm the girl, Sikes seems out of control and he goes straight to Nancy. She is

Learner's Space

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Learner's Space

sleeping when Sikes wakes her up and dreadfully catches her on the neck and accuses her of being a betrayer. Nancy tries to explain that she has exposed nothing about him, but he is so outraged that he hit her on her head and kills her instantly. The reader is surely not ready for such a sudden and horrific development. It is only after the murder took that Sikes begins to get terrified about his consequence. He locks the door with the dead body and starts to wander aimlessly on the streets. He also hears from people on the streets about the murder. When he returns to London exhausted and tormented, he finds himself so full of agony that he becomes sick. While he crosses a village with a fire incident, he tries to abscond but accidentally hangs himself in front of the public while escaping with a rope.

SAQ

Q1. Describe the horrific murder of Nancy and the circumstances around this incident. (75 words)

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Q2. Write a note on the life of Edwin Leeford, Oliver's father in terms of what we get to learn from Monks. (40 words)

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When the actual identity of Oliver is about to be revealed, Mr Brownlow threatens Monks with police. Oliver's father had married Monks' mother only to satisfy his father, so later on he fell in love with Agnes, Oliver's mother. Both were passionately together and Agnes became pregnant. Meanwhile, Edwin had to leave when he was called to Rome to inherit a huge property from his relative. His wife too went with him. In the course of events, both Edwin and his wife died. But Before dying Edward left a will leaving his property to his wife and to also transfer some amount to Agnes who was about to give birth to a child. But Monks' mother destroyed the will leaving everything solely to her son. Next, Monks also discloses to Brownlow his intention of removing Oliver from his way of inheriting the property of their father. At this point Brownlow again blackmails Monks and makes him share his property with Oliver. Monks had no option as his criminal activities would not allow him to stay peacefully otherwise.

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In the following concluding chapters, Noah and Fagin are arrested and tried. Whereas Fagin is sentenced to death, Noah is forgiven for becoming the informer and supplying with the information of many such criminals. Fagin dies of mental agony again making the readers believe in the concept of divine justice. We also learn about the tragic death of little Dick who was the true companion of Oliver in the workhouse. Mr. Bumble is punished for all of his corruption and he is reduced to be a pauper himself in the workhouse where he was once an administrator. Monks takes his share of property and left for America where he resumes his crimes and eventually gets imprisoned. Some other members of the criminal gang realize the futility of such a filthy life and change themselves.

On a happy note, Brownlow adopted Oliver as his son to light up his barren life. Earlier, he had lost his love and had remained unmarried till now. Harry is married to his long awaited love, Rose. Mrs. Maylie is very happy with her son and his wife. Thus comes to an end the story of Oliver Twist whose life began and continued to be overfed by miseries, misfortunes and troubles but he keeps his goodness intact and finally with the help of some good and kind people he succeeds to overcome every odd and get settled in a happy and well-to-do life.

Learner's Space

SAQ

Q1. Analyze how Dickens tries to delve deep into the cause of Child abuse through the use of biting satire. (50 words)

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Q2. What do you know about divine justice? How is the concept of divine justice exemplified by Dickens in this novel? (60 words)

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Q3. How far can Charles Dickens be called a social reformer and a social critic? Explain after your reading of this strong novel. (50 words)

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4.4 Major Characters

Oliver Twist

He is the central character of the novel that was named by the beadle in the workhouse where he was born. He was the illegitimate child born from the uncertified relationship between his parents- Edwin Leeford and Agnes. He is extremely innocent and this trait of him leads him to be the prey of endless troubles, punishment and tortures wherever he went to live, right from his early years in the workhouse to the apprenticed place to Fagin's deceitful gang. After being born in the workhouse he is sent to Mrs. Mann to be looked after by her. He is brought back to the original place again when he is nine years old.

Agnes Fleming

She is the mother of Oliver who gives birth to him in a workhouse and dies the next moment. She is in a love relationship with Edwin Leeford and becomes pregnant. Since she is an unwed mother and a question for the society, she accept the hardships of the toughest life in order to save her family from social condemnation. Subsequently she goes through tremendous turmoil and hardship before the child's birth.

Edwin Leeford

He is the father of Oliver Twist who does not appear in the novel in physical appearance. He is a wealthy person who is involved in the affair outside his marriage and his beloved gives birth to Oliver although this information is not revealed until Oliver is ten years old and distraught with so many tough conditions in his life. Later on his son keeps on chasing Oliver to turn him into a criminal so as to make him ineligible to inherit the father's estates. But these evil plans could be successful.

Mr. Bumble

He is the beadle of the workhouse where Oliver was born. He constantly shows his unlimited repulsion towards Oliver whenever he gets an opportunity. When Oliver was brought to the board of trustees and when the apprenticeship was tried, on both occasions Bumble rebuked him and called him the most ungrateful and 'bare-facedest'. His reprimanding attitude went so far that the old magistrate had to warn him not to torture the child but to keep him and treat with kindness as the child is pale with fear. He even went to the extent of demolishing the character of Oliver in front of Mr. Brownlow only to get the

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reward advertised in newspaper. Mr. Bumble is one of the instruments through which Dickens has directly brought to exposure the sickly conditions of the English workhouses and the callousness of the inhuman officials who were engaged in looking after the orphans.

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Mrs. Mann

She is the in charge of the branch workhouse in which Oliver stayed for the initial nine years of his orphaned life. She is a selfish lady with no concern for anyone and only her own benefit in mind. She takes most of the fund for herself which is paid to her for the care of the orphans in the branch workhouse. She pretends to be kind to Oliver at the time of his farewell from her place.

Artful Dodger

His actual name is Jack Dawkins who found Oliver on the streets of London and takes him to Fagin with the false promise of helping him. He is one of the most active figures of Fagin's group along with Bates. He is hardly seen in a merry mood. He is greatly responsible for the troubles which Oliver faces in London initially and even later on.

Charley Bates

He is another gang member of Fagin. He is an expert in the trade of picking pockets who is entitled to even train newcomers like Oliver. Although he is a serious contributor to the crime, his cheerful and merry character often removes gloom from the criminals 'den. He is transformed towards the end of the novel.

Fagin

He is the foremost villainous character in the novel who gains the hatred from all the readers owing to his consistent negativity of action and character. He collects small children and trains them as pickpockets thus building up a small empire of debauchery and crime. Even after several instances of failure, he does not leave hope of making little Oliver a thief to promote his criminal business. Interestingly though, he is afraid of Sikes and is obliged to obey the dictates of the cruel monster.

Nancy

She is an active female member of Fagin's gang who was previously a child pickpocket and now the mistress of the Jew. She showed mixed colours in her character. Once she saves Oliver from the fury of Fagin. Although she

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continues to work for the gang, she subsequently risks and ends her life while saving Oliver and bringing him to safety. She ultimately proves herself one of the most pious hearts among the others in the novel. It is ironical that she loves Sikes and never discloses any detail about him; he brutally kills her with the doubt that he is exposed by her.

4.5 Minor Characters

William Sikes

He was a bigger criminal than that of Fagin in terms of his vigour and dynamic dealings. He is characterized as the ultimate devil that had no trace of anything near humanity or kindness. Even Fagin damps himself when Sikes enters with his well built physical severity. He can be regarded as the most dangerous character in the entire novel.

Mr. Brownlow

He is the gentleman whose pocket is picked by the gang members of Fagin leaving Oliver in the hands of the angry mob.

Mrs. Maylie

The kind lady in whose house the robbery is attempted and Oliver is left wounded by a bullet. Later they keep the young boy in her house and take good care of him when he is mostly in need of the same.

Rose Maylie

The young niece of Mrs. Mayle who is very kind and soft hearted who is the one who understood the innocence and helplessness of poor Oliver and also entreats her aunt to be kind. She gets married to Harry.

Monks

He is the mysterious character who keeps appearing in the novel with some puzzled actions and it remains difficult to understand his identity and his motive of chasing Oliver. He confronts Mr. Bumble and then reached Mrs. Bumble to get hold of the articles including the ornament of Oliver's mother. He then strangely throws the articles into the running water to erase any clue to Oliver's parentage. He is revealed to be the half brother of Oliver who is trying to harm Oliver all the while to inherit their father's property alone.

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Mrs. Corney (Mrs. Bumble)

She is the matron of the workhouse and equally greedy and corrupt like all the other malicious members of the workhouse authorities. She is the one to whom Old Sally revealed the truth about Oliver and the gold ornament of his mother. Instead of helping the child with his lost identity and the ornament, she keeps the latter with herself. It is Monks who throws it in water to erase any clue to Oliver's parentage. She later marries Mr. Bumble.

Dr. Losberne

He is the kind hearted doctor who comes to Mrs. Maylie's house to take care of Oliver's injury during the failed robbery. After that he has also assisted to prove Oliver innocent in the crime thereby saving him from the fury of the police. He is seen with the family and during Oliver's remaining difficult days.

Noah

He is the senior apprentice at Mrs. Sowerberry. He is responsible for getting Oliver mercifully out of the apprenticeship. Later, he comes to London and joins Fagin.

Dick

He is an inmate of Oliver in the workhouse who blesses him on his dark journey towards London. While dying, Dick remembers Oliver with affection.

Harry Malie

He is the son of Mrs. Maylie who falls in love with Rose and finally marries her. He is kind and helpful to Oliver.

4.6. Summing Up

This unit was my effort to make you acquainted with this beautiful novel the plot of which is founded on the eventful life of an innocent little boy who suffers in the workhouse right from his birth. My attempt has been also to bring to light the use of realistic mode of writing by Dickens who has left no opportunity to portray and criticize the evils of the London society of his time and the vanity of the Victorian people who thought charity through the workhouses could improve or help the poor from suffering. The Poor Law of 1834 rather brought tremendous miseries to the poor never to end. Dickens' plunge into portraying the dirty side of the government establishments and the

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realistic picture of the prostitutes and different types of criminals made tell us about his originality and courage as a responsible author of the society. I would suggest you to read at least a few of his other novels to enter into the world of Dickens' vivid characterization and diverse facets of the city life showcased in his masterpieces.

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Unit 5 : Charles Dickens: *Oliver Twist* (Themes and Techniques)

Unit Structure

5.1 Objectives

5.2 Introduction

5.3 The themes of *Oliver Twist*

5.4 Symbols

5.5 Characterization

5.6 Point of View and Narrative structure

5.7 The Social Concern in the Novel

5.8 Summing Up

5.9 References and Suggested Readings

5.1 Objectives

The objective of this unit is to encourage you to

- *evaluate* the novel in terms of its themes,
- *learn* about the techniques employed by Dickens in *Oliver Twist* and
- *analyse* how these techniques work to make the novel complete and effective.

5.2 Introduction

The reading of a fictional narrative is easier than to adequately appreciate its technical aspects and the author's emotions engrained in the text about the particular aspects of life. To me, if we can fall for a good novelist, the novelist definitely pours out his heart to create that world in his fiction that grasps our minds and also keeps us attached to it. It is never the same as watching a movie or enjoying the staging of a play. While a staged play has its own charm in the very immediacy it can offer to the audience; the novel charms us with the absence of any immediate visual with its characters and the plot proceedings.

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The narration and the definite point of view that takes us through the story is an integral part of this narrated flow of the matter. The novel was the most popular genre in the Victorian Age and it was profuse in both quantity and quality brought by great masters like Thomas Hardy, George Elliot, Thackeray and Dickens. The preceding age too saw the development of the novel, but the social order and the reading sensibility of the public was yet to emerge. Besides, the subject matter and technical aspects of the genre was wanting in maturity and because of this it remained less upgraded.

Although these great authors were all unmistakably unique in their own ways, the most prolific was Dickens. He wrote a number of novels and majority of them were successful and he became the most popular fictions writers of England. Thackeray is a great satirist too, his *Vanity Fair* exposed the superficiality and vanity of his times and how man degrades to corruption. Hardy created his own imaginary location called Wesex and he dealt with the countryside and the daily lives of the simple people in their mundane affairs with the play of fate and luck. We are going to discuss about the themes, techniques and structure of the second novel of Charles Dickens- *Oliver Twist*.

SAQ

How far does a social condition help and inspire a writer to create his piece of literature? (50 marks)

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5.3 The themes of *Oliver Twist*

I hope all of you have enjoyed reading the novel *Oliver Twist* and have gained considerable insight into the multifaceted ideas presented by the author Charles Dickens (1812- 1870). Along with the strongest idea of the deplorable conditions of the poor, He has also portrayed the darker side of the society i.e. the crimes which could be seen in such a wider scale in the city life of London. Here, we may also make ourselves think over the fact that these filthy conditions and the cruel mentality of such evil minded characters can also be the result of their poverty and the subsequent deprivation of healthy

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family lives. When we look at the character of Oliver Twist, he is always and consistently being deprived of first, the basic amenities of living and then even the human conditions to stay; as he was bullied and tortured and insulted by almost everyone whom he meets. Although his parents were well to do people, the circumstances blocked the way of his real identity for a decade which made him suffer under inhuman conditions. He too came close to the world of crimes and could have easily turned into a thief or a robber with the help of the training and attachment which Fagin and his people were showering on him, but his inherent goodness and innocence prevented him from destroying his life and he almost stuck to the human qualities in him. In the novel the city life has been displayed much to be the result of the uncensored Industrial Revolution and the class divisions created by it. Besides, the consumerist culture has brought about an unhealthy promotion of the idea of individualism as opposed to that of the social concern which can bring about progress and moral upgradation in the society. Also, the city's accumulation of sordidness is posed with the stark contrast to the healing and friendly atmosphere of the countryside in this novel. Let us now discuss the important themes of this novel in detail.

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Poverty

Invariably, poverty can be regarded as the most prominent theme of the novel. Also because it is this poverty which led Oliver to fall prey to such an endless series of misery, tortures and malnutrition in the entire story. Had the workhouse people known that his mother possessed such a big gold ornament, they might have been little lenient towards him; at least for the luring appeal of the valuable item.

Although poverty can be caused by many reasons, the poverty of the Victorian Age was mainly caused by the ill effects of the Industrial Revolution and the unscrupulous dealing of it by the government and other authorities. The growth of developmental schemes and operations led to material progress which was much approved of by the Queen, but the ill impact was on the common people. The social status of the Rich and the poor got widened.

The failure of charity

With the theme of poverty we must also look into the idea of the failure of the charity systems introduced by the government with some private collaboration. The major part of the novel definitely exposes the disappointing disaster of the so called charity acts which were introduced and practiced by

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the English government authorities to eradicate the burning problem of the street people. In this novel Dickens has tried to attack these measures which were taken that practically benefitted the middle men but were of little help for the poor in the work houses. The root of the problem was the Poor Act of 1834 which allowed help to the poor only when they entered the workhouses and did some work to literally earn their living, nothing was offered free. In fact, the authorities were of the notion that poverty is the result of laziness and inactivity. But unfortunately, the workhouse and the branches were run by such cruel and inhuman officials that they never allowed anything good to reach the paupers, especially the small children who were naïve and helpless to protest.

SAQ

Do you believe that any form of true charity was carried on in the entire novel? How does the concept of charity prove to be farcical in the context of *Oliver Twist*? (40 + 40 marks)

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Theft and crime

The world of active crimes that is depicted in the novel is really another theme. At first we are introduced to the endless miseries of the poor who are living in the workhouses in the provincial city of London. We read about the pathetic conditions of everyone who get innumerable doses of inhumanity and starve for a serving of the flowing gruel. These half fed are made to work on different types of places as apprentices without any single person showing sympathy of kindness towards them. The measures taken by the government are absolutely incapable of giving these children a decent life of any good teaching or a happy countenance. All they get is neglect, rebukes and deceit. Now, with such kind of upbringing by these surrogate parents in the workhouses, these growing human beings would definitely crave for a full stomach, a healthy environment and also a better life. The next thing that will come to their minds will be to achieve the facilities of life from wrong means, as they were never treated with the right way. This will give rise to criminal minds as there seems no respite from poverty. The character of Fagin represents this development from deprived paupers to thieves and criminals. He has

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created a gang which works illegally to earn their livelihoods; not only this, he collects small children who are helpless or homeless (which was very common in London) and trains them to be expert delinquents. Most innocent and naïve children would been tempted and threatened to follow that path to gain the benefits of the city life, but Oliver could come back again and again, also with the help of some good people, to finally establish himself for a decent and respectable future.

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SAQ

Write a note on the concept of charity that has been criticized by Dickens in this novel.(100 words)

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Good versus evil

Although evil side seems quite stronger than the good in the beginning of the novel, good ultimately had to triumph in the long run establishing the idea of poetic justice. From the birth of Oliver Twist till the arrival of his happy moments, the child undergoes the company of only evil people. Right from the old nurse Sally to his villainous half brother Monks he meets and is tortured by all sorts of indecent and immoral people. He grows up with the cranky Mrs. Mann who never showed any sympathy to the children. Mr. Bumble brought him back to the workhouse only to torture him and call him the most audacious and the most ungrateful of the paupers. He only once escaped the task of chimney sweeping when one of the board members saw him pale and timid and ordered the beadle to treat him kindly

The perils of individualism

The Industrial Revolution led to the growth of capitalism which widened the gap between the rich and the poor causing the poor to the level of misery and starvation. Capitalism also seemed to promote the idea of the individual cause. The capitalists spread the idea and propaganda that society will make progress when individual causes are taken care of first. In the novel towards the end when the Artful Dodger was caught by the police and presented for trial, the villain Fagin tells that each of them must take individual care of their security so that the collective security of the group (gang) is maintained. This

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statement of his indicates that individualism was believed to be the requirement to achieve social stability and ultimate progress. The absurdity of such a belief has been unveiled when Nancy goes against her group, for the cause of good, though; and other members also turn against a few others. This is because they had thought only about themselves and hence were torn apart at the strike of a blow. But the good people forming a world of their had love, affection, goodness and mutual trust amongst themselves; they were engaged in the larger concern of the society. This is the reason they did not fall apart but succeeded at last.

City life contrasted by Country life

The novel overtly contrasts the city and the country in a subtle manner. The provincial city where Oliver was born in the workhouse was the beginning of the cruelty and the sense of deprivation is shown to have taken birth. The sordid living condition initially at Mrs. Mann's lodging and then taken over to the tormenting life at Mr. Bumble's main branch are all the same- crowded, starved, dirty and full of tortures. When Oliver flees to the bigger city of London without any idea of the larger scenario of filth and danger he has only the hope of living peacefully with a full stomach and without being tortured and bullied. But life in London has more complexities and twists to offer to the young child who gets trapped in Fagin's gang and in dragged to face endless troubles including the fury of a mob and then arrest. It was the goodness of Mr. Brownlow who saved him and took care of him after this massive setback. While we see the countryside in the Maylies' house, even after a dangerous robbery attempt Oliver was accepted with kindness and humanity by these rich but benevolent people who remained with him in all his further hardships upto the discovery of his parentage and history and the final adoption by Brownlow. It is shown in the novel that Cities are more prone and vulnerable to exploitation and degradation of human life. On the contrary, the countryside can always give us respite from the exploitation caused by the consumerist culture and the callousness of greedy human beings. In terms of physical appearance too, the city looks more occupied, dirty and lacking in discipline whereas the country can be seen clean and not cramped. In the story the simplicity of the countryside has been shown to have offered some peace of mind even to the most complex character.

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Fate

When Oliver was doomed to take birth in the workhouse, it was none of his faults nor was he able to change it because he could not get any information of his parents. His parents were noble people but they faltered to have become parents without getting married. The consequences were primarily by the mother as she was the one carrying the baby and the companion was already dead. Hence, the unwed mother embraced death almost deliberately. In all these developments Oliver had no bearing at all. Whatever possibility was left by the mother's necklace for Oliver's redemption from the sordid workhouse was also stolen by Old Sally. The meeting of Brownlow and the Maylies amid the unbearable 'torments can also be termed as the relief offered by Oliver's fate. Thus, it can be said that there is a recurring role of fate exemplified in the story. On a positive note, Oliver was saved from growing up into a poor adult as he gained a huge property with the revelation of his parentage.

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SAQ

1. Evaluate with reference to *Oliver Twist* how poverty can lead to the destruction of someone's mind and future. (50 words)

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2. Have you read any novel by Thomas Hardy? Do you think Dickens' presentation of the role of fate in Oliver Twist can be compared to Hardy's depiction of fate and destiny?

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Wastage of Childhood

What we learn in this novel is the complete caricature of the concept called childhood. The children staying in the workhouse do not enough food to fill their stomachs, no decent clothing but only dirty rags and the ultimate absence of anything called kindness. The officials like Mr. Bumble, Mrs. Mann, Mrs, Bumble, the Sowerberrys are so inhuman and callous that they have led many children to die of hunger and deprivation in the workhouse. The minds

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and bodies of these young ones never seem to be full but they are terribly helpless to protest or ask for anything. And it becomes doubtful as to how many children will live to be healthy human beings for the future of England. Thus, the wastage of precious childhood is vividly portrayed by Dickens.

Exploitation

Exploitation, especially of the poor and the helpless, is one of the themes in the novel. The workhouse and the entire larger system of charity preached by the government bodies and the officials is fake and they are here only make profit of off the paupers. They misuse the funds which are granted for the care of the children, orphans, unwed mothers and old people in the workhouse. Thus, exploitation is yet another theme in this book which concerns with a noble social cause.

5.4 Symbols

Darkness

Darkness is a recurring symbol in *Oliver Twist*. Beginning from the darkness created during the child's birth by detaching him from his identity, he has been engulfed by only dark minded people wherever he went. He was confined to the dark cell as a punishment for asking for more food. When he leaves the lodging of Mr. and Mrs. Sowerberry in the darkness, it symbolizes his uncertain future and grim prospects of a healthy life.

City

The city symbolizes the filth and crowded environment in which evil and crimes are planned and executed. It is not safe for strangers. It has strange looking streets and shops where anti social people hang out and look for new ways to trap naïve human beings into their hubs. In the city we can find struggle to survive and to sustain, there is no abundance of kindness and goodwill.

Countryside

The countryside is the place which can relieve us from the bondage of being trapped in the dark spooky streets. Contrasted to the congested city the countryside offers us sun – bathed mornings and fresh air from the vast open spaces. The openness of the locality also suggests the open minds of the people residing there. The countryside is a relief to the harsh and troublesome life in the city.

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Check Your Progress

Do you think the symbols used by Dickens serve in the appropriate way for the novel? (40 words)

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5.5 Characterization

Dickens is a master in the art of characterization and I hope there will not be many with any second opinion about this. Oliver Twist was published in 1839 as a direct attack on the social evils of the complex Victorian society. The depiction of the workhouses and the deplorable conditions of the poor and the small children has been demonstrated by Dickens.

Dickens' characters are drawn with the vividness of his imaginative power which laid hold on some of the well – marked physical traits and some peculiarity of manner which every reader liked at once. And the plausibility with which they were presented to us occupies our minds to the exclusion of all criticism about it. Bumble's three- cornered hat and his love for it represents his ambitions for recognition and power. The characters and their related details along with the extra details of the scenes are portrayed in such immediacy that we feel that we are beholding a picture of the events taking place right before us. Besides, the coercive fore of the realities of the common man's life is another aspect which minimizes the criticisms and contradictions about his art of characterization.

Dickens has been criticized for creating flat and passive characters like the one of Oliver who seems to be static without any development or evolution. In Oliver's case, it is the circumstances and the people surrounding him which never allowed him to show any of his characteristic development or evolution, or we may say, it could not be expected of a child of merely nine or ten years. Flat characters are those which do not grow or remain stagnant despite all opportunities. On the other hand, round characters are the ones which consistently evolve in the course of the story. Oliver cannot be criticized for being static; he too can be seen developing as an individual who learns through thick and thin, the real faces of people and how to contain oneself even in the

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dire situations. Even not losing his goodness and remaining innocent amidst all the luring criminal opportunities are the instances of his growing up as the main character of the novel.

In his novels *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations* too we get the stories of children as protagonists. David and Pip, the children protagonists are so well drawn that they are admired and forever remembered by everyone. When David Copperfield says "I know enough of the world now, to have almost lost the capacity of being surprised by anything" it is an indication how much exposed he is to the drastic conditions of life at an early age.

SAQ

What, according to you, is the distinguishing trait of Dickens' characterization? (60 words)

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5.6 Point of View and Narrative structure

Point of view can be understood as the voice in which the story of the novel is transmitted to the readers. Who is the person or whose voice it is that is narrating the plot proceedings to us? The answer to this question is the point of view of a story. Point of view mainly is of three types:

a) the first person narrative
b) the second person narrative , and
c) the third person narrative

The point of view of the communicator, in turn, goes on to develop a narrative style. In order to develop a narrative this voice is essential along with dialogues, the sentence construction and the extent of details used in the process of narration.

In the present novel the point of view is that of the third person omniscient narrator who stands at a distance from the happenings in the plot and keeps commenting on the speeches and feelings of each one of them. It is quite evident though, that the narrator here is not altogether objective. The third

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person narrative voice seems to be supportive and sympathetic to the people who are with the protagonists. The narrator's voice leaves no space to criticize the authorities of the workhouse, the villains, and the police authorities as well. A sharp ironical tone has been employed by Dickens to condemn all of these institutions. It is known to all that Dickens is the most prolific and the most popular novelists not only of his time but of all time, his individual style of writing has been one of the factors that has brought this position to him. Very artistically he chooses his materials and renders his situations, characters, actions and descriptions of his novels. His choice of language and syntax is suited to the subjects he deals with. He is a real craftsman in creating and handling of the characters according to their places, roles and circumstances. The language that we find in the expressions of the characters is enough to tell us that it is the contemporary Victorian language with the accent and related tone of that time. Every writer has his/her individual style of writing, and that develops every time takes up new things to write. With the writer, the style evolves along with age, time, exposure and maturity. Poets like Wordsworth and W. B. Yeats are believed to have evolved so much in their styles of writing that each of them has three stages of their literary production. Their evolution takes them stand apart from their own creations when considered in isolation. It is interesting to note that although Oliver is the hero of the novel, it is not his highlighted exploited that the novel gains momentum and excitement but his intense suffering and continual deprivation which makes it so. The characters are described in details of not only their physical built up also their feelings and motives which are expressed through the apt choice of words by the author. The character of the most devilish villain Fagin is described in such a way which creates immediate disgust in the readers. Dickens has also employed some humorous touch in describing some characters. Particularly amusing is the description of Mrs. Corney's appearance when Bumble was flirting with her: "Her body was bent by age; her limbs trembled with palsy; her face distorted into a mumbling leer, resembled more the grotesque shaping of some wild pencil, than the work of Nature's hand." It amuses us to see that Bumble is flirting with this ageing lady, and that clearly is for his professional benefit.

The opening scene of Oliver Twist is free from any imposition on any institution or any character in particular. It refers to only the conditions of uncertainty and darkness that could be the destiny of the newborn so introduced. This introduction of the story reminds us of the dreary opening scene of *David Copperfield* in the graveyard with the orphaned boy in the marshes. Dickens was not much keen on creating some improbable fairy

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tales for the readers but real life characters who really live among us and go through the journey of life. He does not force us to believe in something that he preaches, he rather leads us to feel and believe in some cause or concern of real worth.

As a nineteenth century Victorian novel, *Oliver Twist* can be regarded as a classic tale of an orphan boy who is named Oliver Twist accidentally by the workhouse beadle Mr. Bumble. While he has made lengthy details of the miserable and starved life in the workhouses, he willingly shows the truth about the squalid condition of poverty in the nineteenth century cities and points to the fact that this unbearable poverty converts many poor people into a forced criminal existence.

The biggest characteristic feature of Dickens' narrative technique is the use of satire in this novel. Satire is a literary device in which irony, humour and exaggerated language is employed to criticize the follies of some society or some individual. The shortcomings and hypocrisy of the contemporary England has been exposed and ridiculed by Dickens in the most naked manner. Beginning from the deprivation of the poor children from food and other human necessities to the harsh behavior of the officials extended upto his getting trapped in Fagin's gang- all of these bring to light the darker truth of the government's false declaration that it made adequate arrangements for the development of the poor. There is seen only snobbery, avarice and utter callousness in the officials who are in charge of the institutions available for charity.

Although Dickens is constantly criticized for extensive use of details in his description and the weakness of plots, what we have discerned in his narration is the magic of this very excess of detail. In fact, detail is his specialty. Besides, his small lapses are easily overpowered by his numerous qualities as a master of fiction writing. His skilful mastery of the pathos, humour and irony together manipulate the incidents and even his long narratives do not fail to give us immense pleasure. He has literally laughed at the follies of his society. The characters of Bumble and Mr. Sowerberry have been dealt with humour in their appearance. Bumble is called "so mighty a personage as a beadle" whereas the rank of beadle was of secondary importance in the workhouse. Even the members of the board of trustees have been described as being healthy people, suggesting that the rich exploit the poor and become obese monetarily as well as physically. In this process the poor people die of hunger and starvation as happens with little Dick. Also, to arouse passion in the readers, dickens has used sentiment, gothic fiction (in the scenes liked with the fearful criminal acts) and

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Although the narrative voice is that of the third person, on many points this voice seems to comment on the pitiable conditions of the poor. Hence, the narrator seems to be some sort of a moralist who has opinions to offer on the suffering of the poor as well as the cruelty of the oppressors. Dickens has been criticized for being too realistic but in reality he wished to make positive changes in the terrible conditions of his society and therefore entailed so much realism in the book. The appropriate indictment of the social evils probably could have been forced without this realistic portrayal in the novel's narrative.

Learner's Space

SAQ

Comment on the description of the criminals in the novel. How repulsive are they to you? (40 + 40 words)

.....

.....

.....

Another important aspect of Dickens' narrative is his love and establishment of optimism and hence the victory (in most cases) of goodness. The triumph of good is assured in his world. Although many novelists can be seen presenting either the excess of evil in negative characters or the surplus of good in the protagonists. But in Dickens's plots, evil is encountered repeatedly by the good, but it is tactfully diverted so that readers can be assured that whatever may come, we may achieve peace in our lives through goodness.

Interestingly, critics have condemned him for creating a world full of crimes, prostitutions and other evils, and they also criticize him when he does the contrary by depicting a world of peace and satisfaction. Thus, it is true that it is never possible to satisfy the critics. Moreover, geniuses are always being noticed and targeted by the strongest of critical opinions and this, in turn, paves the way for the further development of the author.

5.7 The Social Concern in the Novel

As already mentioned in the previous units, the social concern in the novel is very strong, rather it can be said to the most prominent of all the

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Learner's Space

concerns in the book. As Dickens was forced to experience the harsh and sordid life of a factory worker at an early age, he could have had the first hand knowledge and information about the nooks and corners of the much industrialized city of London. He met different characters from diverse trades of the city life and could know them very closely; he could see the sufferings of the underprivileged section of people who go through harassment and deprivation from the capitalist set up of the society. Dickens did not hesitate to expose all the evils of all the social institutions existing in the Victorian Age, he is really blunt and furious while describing the extent to which the exploitation and the torture of the poor was carried at every level of the society otherwise replete with industrial development. He laughs at the callousness of the characters for the ways they treat the paupers, especially Oliver. For example, on the night after returning from Mrs. Mann's lodging when Oliver sobbed to sleep on a rough, hard bed, Dickens comments: "What a novel illustration of the tender laws of England! They let the paupers go to sleep!" The details of the inhuman treatment meted out to the young boy at every place he goes to is the indication how badly the workhouse residents were treated, herein lies the failure of all the social institutions like the government, the church, the police, the court, etc. although Dickens has been attacked by critics and moralists on his open demonstration of evil practices like crime and prostitution; he was resolute to bring the actual pictures of the society and not a manipulated one merely to look morally upright. He believed to present our lives in whatever way it exists, so that we can make positive repairs.

SAQ

Comment on the realistic portrayal of the social evils in *Oliver Twist*. (75 words)

.....

.....

.....

5.8 Summing Up

Oliver Twist is a long work of fiction with detailed description of the workhouse in the provincial city, the grim conditions in the city of London and the countryside of the Maylies. We enter the world of Dickens and emerge out as sensitized and compassionate people after reading about so much

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suffering in the poor people's lives and especially the little orphan Oliver. I hope you will definitely like to read more of Dickens's novels in the near future. Edward Wagenknecht once expressed his opinion that the novel is "the most beloved piece of fiction in the English language.." If that is so, Dickens in the novelist who has made this beloved piece of work the apple of our eyes by his sublime presentation of his writing style. And rightly so as we continue to read, discuss and research on his shining pearls even in this twenty first century.

Learner's Space

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REFRAMING WOMANHOOD

DISCOURSES, IDENTITIES AND RESISTANCE

Edited by
KABITA BHUYAN
JINI RANI BORO

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(A Multilingual Volume of Research Articles)

Edited by
Kabita Bhuyan
Jini Rani Boro

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Education, Voice, and Resistance: Negotiating Identity Beyond Tradition in Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*

*Pranita Kalita**

Strictly speaking, "women" cannot be said to exist.

— JULIA KRISTEVA

Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* offers a compelling exploration of how gendered power operates not only through patriarchal dominance but also through internalized structures sustained by women themselves. At the heart of the narrative lies Dielieno, whose gradual awakening through education distinguishes her from the women around her and enables a quiet yet consequential form of resistance. From a five-year old girl to that of a married woman, her journey itself argues that education in *A Terrible Matriarchy* functions as a critical site of gendered negotiation, allowing her to cultivate voice, self-awareness, and ethical judgment in a cultural environment that demands mere endurance and submission from the females rather than expression. By contrasting Dielieno's educational striving with the silence and compliance of other women deprived of learning, the novel reveals how lack of education perpetuates oppressive traditions, while access to knowledge opens possibilities for reconfiguring womanhood beyond inherited norms.

The world that is inhabited by Dielieno is governed by strict codes of gendered behaviour that equate femininity with

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obedience, restraint, and suffering. From childhood, girls are trained to accept deprivation as moral instruction, while boys are granted affection, nourishment, and authority. Interestingly, the overpowering grandmother Vibano addressed the little granddaughter as 'girl'. The girl with a search for self-identity would utter: "Why doesn't Grandmother callme by my name, Mother? Why does she only call me 'the girl'? Doesn't she like my name?" (Kire 4) This asymmetry is neither accidental nor questioned; it is presented as tradition. Such conditioning echoes Simone de Beauvoir's single most famous assertion: "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (Borde & Chevallier 14) This takes place through social training and restriction imposed on them. In Kire's narrative, womanhood is produced through repeated acts of denial- of food, of affection, of education- until endurance itself becomes a feminine virtue, or is compelled to be so.

Dielieno's grandmother Vibano embodies this logic most forcefully. As the matriarch of the household, she exercises unquestioned authority, enforcing discipline with cruelty justified as moral necessity. Her power, however, is deeply invested in preserving the very structures that once oppressed her while growing up. Vibano's worldview allows no room for questioning; in her way of life, tradition is equated with truth. In a strong moment, the narrative suggests that suffering is an essential preparation for a woman's life, an idea she passes down unquestioningly to her family members. (ch. 3) These dynamic reveals that patriarchal values continue to operate even under matriarchal authority, maintained not merely through external enforcement but through deep internalisation by women folk themselves.

Within this rigid structure, education emerges as a deeply gendered privilege. Schooling of girls is treated as dispensable, while boys' learning is encouraged as preparation for public life. Dilieno becomes aware quite early that education is not simply unavailable to her but actively devalued. If not for her father, the grandmother clearly would have detained the schooling of this bright girl by her sheer malice towards the girl children: "I really do not approve of girls getting educated. It only makes them get fancy notions about themselves and they forget their place in the

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family." (Kire 22) This denial of learning functions as a means of containment, ensuring that girls remain confined to domestic roles and uncritical thereby ensuring the silent acceptance of authority. Yet Dielieno's response to this deprivation sets her apart. Unlike other girls who internalize these limitations, she continues to value education as something meaningful, even when it offers no immediate reward. School becomes one of the few spaces where she is not reduced to obedience. In a reflective moment, Dielieno recognizes that learning allows her to feel visible in ways the household never permits (ch. 4). This recognition marks the beginning of her resistance not as rebellion, but as awareness. The fact that to be able to write an official letter can be a sort of empowerment amazes her endlessly and she strives further to achieve education.

Bell Hooks' conception of education as a "practice of freedom" is instructive here. For Dielieno, education does not promise escape from oppression, but it enables her to interpret her experiences differently. She begins to understand inequality as structural rather than personal failure. This shift in perception is crucial: it transforms endurance into critique.

The significance of Dielieno's educational resistance becomes clearer when contrasted with the lives of other women in the novel. Vibano herself, despite her authority, remains trapped within a worldview that normalizes cruelty. Her lack of education does not diminish her power, but it limits her capacity for reflection. She reproduces violence not because she is inherently oppressive, but because she has never been taught to question it.

Similarly, other women in the household accept hardship as destiny. Their silence is learned rather than natural. Without education, they lack the conceptual language to name injustice. As the narrative suggests, suffering becomes meaningful only because alternatives are unimaginable (ch. 5). These women do not resist because they cannot envision resistance.

By placing Dielieno alongside these figures who are incapable of reaching out to education, Kire underscores the central argument that the absence of education sustains oppressive traditions by foreclosing critique and also the mindset for any

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kind of protest. Education, conversely, disrupts the intergenerational transmission of gendered subordination.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity provides a useful lens for understanding how Dielieno's engagement with education unsettles normative femininity. He expresses the existence of numerous debates about the true nature of being a woman: "Is there some commonality among "women" that preexistes their oppression, or do "women" have a bond by virtue of their oppression alone?" (Butler 7) In *A Terrible Matriarchy*, femininity is performed through silence, submission, and intellectual withdrawal. Girls are expected to repeat these behaviours until they appear natural. Dielieno's desire to learn seems to disrupt this repetition and each act of her learning-reading, listening, questioning-constitutes a deviation from acceptable femininity. These deviations, though subtle, accumulate over time. Butler reminds us that gender norms persist only through repetition; when repetition falters, norms are exposed as contingent. Thus, Dielieno's education functions as performative resistance, gradually undoing the script she is expected to follow. There are very few people who would be of support or encouragement to the ones like Dilieno, the ones who are, are obstructed by the dominant position holders. Although Dilieno gets immense affection from a few of the family members, her suffering under the stern grandmother hardly comes to an end. Atu tries to tell Vibano not to be so harsh on the small girl: "She wasn't bothering me. She is a child, don't be so hard on her, Aunt,...Good heavens Aunt, she is just a child." (Kire 5)

Dielieno's developing voice is inseparable from her education. Initially, silence functions as survival. Speaking invites punishment, particularly under Vibano's authority. However, as Dielieno begins to learn and grow, she starts articulating the dissent internally, she questions injustice, recognizes hypocrisy, and refuses to fully internalize the logic of suffering.

In a crucial moment of self-realisation, Dielieno recognises that Vibano's harsh punishments are not morally justified acts of discipline but arbitrary exercises of power, exposing the cruelty embedded within everyday authority (ch. 6). Though she does not overtly challenge authority, this internal refusal to submit

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herself marks a decisive shift which suggests the erosion of the dominant narratives to justify or solidify them. Education gives her the tools to think against power and dominance, even when speech remains constrained.

This form of resistance aligns with James C. Scott's concept of "everyday resistance," which emphasizes subtle, non-confrontational acts of dissent. Dielieno's resistance operates at the level of consciousness rather than action. Michel Foucault's insight that power is sustained through knowledge further clarifies this dynamic- by acquiring knowledge, Dielieno destabilizes authority from within and this keeps the same from growing further roots.

An important distinction in the novel lies between education and ritual knowledge. Women like Vibano possess extensive knowledge of customs and traditions, yet this knowledge reinforces hierarchy rather than challenging it. Knowledge that comes merely as a ritual teaches obedience, not critique. Education, by contrast, introduces plurality- alternative ways of seeing and judging the world. Dielieno's learning allows her to differentiate between discipline and injustice, tradition and cruelty. This distinction is the novel's most significant feminist intervention. Education does not estrange her from her culture; it enables her to reinterpret it.

Dilieno's educational resistance resonates with broader patterns in Northeast Indian women's writing. In Indira Goswami's *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker*, women endure oppressive customs within a rigid ritual economy. Their suffering remains largely inexpressible because education is absent. Knowledge is ritualistic rather than critical, binding women to tradition rather than enabling resistance. Similarly, Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home* portrays women whose lives are shaped by conflict and customary expectations, there remains nothing remarkable beyond that. While some moments of awareness appear, lack of sustained education often results in internalized silence and suppression. Resistance remains an emotional phenomenon rather than ideological.

Against this backdrop, *A Terrible Matriarchy* stands out for its sustained and deep focus on education as an internal and

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transformative mode of resistance. Rather than staging rebellion through overt defiance, Easterine Kire situates Dilieno's resistance within everyday acts of learning, curiosity, and gradual self-development. Dilieno does not initially reject her community or its traditions; instead, she negotiates her place within its rigid structures through observation, discipline, and the steady acquisition of knowledge. Her eagerness to attend school, her delight with books, and her quiet perseverance in learning English mark the beginning of an inward shift that gradually expands her sense of agency and self-worth. Education becomes, for her, not merely a pathway to social mobility but a means of reimagining her identity beyond domestic containment.

One pivotal moment occurs when Dilieno begins to realise that learning enables her to interpret authority critically rather than accept it unquestioningly. As she grows academically, she becomes increasingly aware of the arbitrariness of the moral codes imposed upon her, particularly those governing obedience, and gender roles. Her internal rejection of Vibano's harsh disciplinary logic- recognising cruelty as a product of custom rather than ethical necessity- signals a crucial epistemic break. Education thus cultivates moral reasoning, allowing Dilieno to distinguish between tradition and justice. She recognises that schooling offers her a voice, however fragile, within a system that otherwise silences young girls. Her growing confidence in reading and expression gradually reshapes her emotional world, fostering self-reflection and resilience. From learning about puberty (Kire 176- 177) to the difference between school teaching jobs and the D. C. office clerical jobs, (Kire 180) Dilieno achieves immense maturity as an individual with her exposure to education.

This emphasis on education extends the feminist trajectory of Northeast women's narratives by foregrounding learning not merely as aspiration or escape, but as a deeply ethical and affective process that transforms consciousness. Through schooling, Dilieno acquires the intellectual tools to interrogate inherited norms, reinterpret authority, and imagine forms of belonging beyond the confines of patriarchal domesticity. Yet this resistance remains embedded within everyday life. Her intellectual growth unfolds alongside domestic labour, familial obligations, and

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emotional vulnerability, suggesting that meaningful transformation does not emerge through rupture alone but through sustained engagement with lived experience.

By centring education as a quiet but enduring force of empowerment, *A Terrible Matriarchy* articulates a distinctive feminist vision in which resistance is enacted through reflection, endurance, and moral self-fashioning. Kire thus reconfigures education as a cultural resource that enables women to renegotiate tradition from within, making it a transformative site of voice, ethical awareness, and selfhood rather than merely a vehicle of social advancement.

Through Dielieno's journey, Kire redefines womanhood as a process shaped by awareness rather than mere endurance. Simone de Beauvoir's insight into the social construction of femininity finds clear expression here, yet the novel also insists that such conditioning is never total, education creates cracks within the structure of domination.

Dielieno does not achieve liberation in a conventional sense. Her resistance is partial, fragile, and ongoing. Yet it is precisely this incompleteness that lends the narrative its power. Education enables her to claim a degree of autonomy—the autonomy to think, to judge, and to imagine alternatives.

By placing Dielieno's educational struggle at the centre and contrasting it with the silent endurance of uneducated women, *A Terrible Matriarchy* reveals education as a decisive force in the negotiation of female identity. Education fosters voice, critical consciousness, and subtle resistance, allowing womanhood to be reconfigured beyond inherited traditions. Drawing on feminist and resistance theory while remaining grounded in lived experience, the novel affirms the transformative potential of learning as a quiet but potent challenge to gendered power. In doing so, Kire positions education not as escape, but as ethical awakening- one that reshapes identity from within.

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