

Utilitarianism and the Education System in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*

Anshu Gagaj

All our wisdom consists in servile prejudices. All our practices are only subjection, impediment and constraint. Civil man is born, lives and dies in slavery. At his birth he is sewed in swaddling clothes. . . . So long as he keeps his human shape, he is enchained by our institutions.

Rousseau, *Emile*

Abstract

After an overview of current debates on NAAC accreditation cycle, this study tries to demonstrate how *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens is a central text in mechanical classroom and helps us understand the politics of the present education system and the accreditation agencies. The policies designed by the accreditation agencies are a medium to create the social inequality among the people. However, education is perceived as a process which helps develop students according to their needs and potentials. Published in 1854, Dicken's novel anticipates many contemporary issues related in education. *Hard Times* underscores the damaging impact of mechanical structures of education while also assigning responsibility to academicians/educationists.

Keywords : Education systems; Utilitarianism.

Education is viewed as a primary agent which is a meansto impart knowledge, values and norms to the people. It helps people develop the ability to make correct choices and decisions. Education has always been positively perceived as constructive, optimistic and practical. Whereas, the institutions act as mechanism of social control. In contemporary times, with the advent of technology, education systems arealso acquiring new dimensions. In the past, a lot of efforts have been made to improvise the standard of education. India is a country with diverse culture and has the diverse education systems in the world. In order to make the education system comprehensive various strategies havebeen formulated and designed by the accreditation agencies of India. Higher educational agencies in India play a vital role in promoting quality education across various domains. The National Policy on Education spelt out strategic plans and formed

NAAC which is an autonomous institution of UGC to address these concerns. Similarly, there are many accreditation agencies and organizations in India that play a vital role in Higher education accreditation. These accreditation bodies are established with a mandate of Quality Assurance of Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) in the country. To fulfil this, mandate these agencies have been carrying out the process from the past many years. According to these agencies quality assurance in education is a continuous process and these bodies ensure to facilitate quality enhancement through the various procedures. The Accreditation and Assessment of NAAC looks into various core values in which the HEI's are contributing like development of nation, inculcating a value system among students, use of technology &c. However, the irony is that they are measuring value system i.e. truth and righteousness in quantitative scales. The utilitarian principle/concept in education and scales to measure the standards have made the exchange of knowledge monotonous and mechanical. These systems assign gradings to colleges after evaluating parameters like curricular aspect, teaching-learning and evaluation, research, innovation and extension, institutional values, Student support and progression &c. To improvise education and to ensure quality the accreditation agencies have created a system which every higher education institute has to undergo and, in that system, also exist various other systems which create further binaries among people having same qualifications. Due to the techniques which these systems have employed education has lost its value and worth altogether, in fact it is a perfunctory activity. Education generated further social stratification among masses. After an overview of current debates on NAAC accreditation cycle, this study tries to demonstrate how *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens is a central text in mechanical classroom and helps us understand the politics of the present education system and the accreditation agencies. The policies designed by the accreditation agencies are also creating the social inequality among the people.

System as defined by Johnson's Dictionary, "an complexure or combination of many things acting together" (qtd. in Duncan 29). The word appears to be synonymous with 'monotony.' The methodologies adopted by these institutions are rigorous and stringent. However, to maintain and assess the quality of the academics and academic institutions at Higher Level of learning by such agencies have become matter-of fact for all government and private institutes disseminating knowledge. They have made education a business and students are perceived as products by such systems which is the main cause of dissatisfaction among students.

Charles Dickens' phenomenal work *Hard Times* which appeared during Victorian times is also a reflection on the education system and the harmful

effects of utilitarian principle. The Victorian age was an age of post-industrialization and an age of transition. In every sphere huge experimentation is taking place. The sudden economic growth and the rise of middle classes have developed new interests among the people. Education is one such area where people have shown huge interest. *Hard Times* depicts the importance of education for every child however, the principle of utilitarianism is primary concern in the work. According to Mukesh Williams, "Utilitarianism was a philosophy based on a minimalist view of man that understood human nature in terms of economic relation alone" (Introduction, xi). *Hard Times* makes one reflect on the contemporary perspective of education policies in which the liberation for the innovative thinking seems limited and restricted and all these policies led to subjection of an individual which makes the nation anti-progressive. Such philosophies have enchained the students and create 'mind-forged manacles' through which it is impossible to come out. Plato through "The Simile of the Cave" tries to highlight the similar human condition where Socrates explains to Plato's brother Glaucon the effect of education. Socrates describes a group of people who have lived as prisoners in a cave throughout their lives, facing the wall. The people watch shadows projected on wall from objects thrown by the fire behind them. These shadows are given name and these shadows are prisoners reality. He further states that:

Then think what would naturally happen to them if they were released from their bonds and cured of their delusions. Suppose one of them were let loose, and suddenly compelled to stand up and turn his head and look and walk towards the fire; all these actions would be painful and he would be too dazzled to see properly the objects of which he used to see the shadows. . . . And if he were made to look directly at the light of the fire, it would hurt his eyes and he would turn back and retreat to the things which he could see properly, which he would think really clearer than the things being shown him. (The *Republic*, 257)

The children in such scenario are enslaved to view reality as being shown to them. They have been rigorously trained to see only in the manner which system has designed for them. They are habitual of objectifying the education as designed for them because it gives to the people concerned like academicians the superior comfort of knowing. Yet the standard based curriculum is harmful for imaginative thinking of the students and they turn into habit of watching the objects in the cave as mentioned by Socrates.

Hard Times provides an insight into the various issues such as the industrialisation of England, unequal position of women and mechanization

of the human beings prevalent during the Victorian times. According to academicians and scholars *Hard Times* is not just a novel of social indignation but a work of 'passionate revolt.' The work only depicts oppressors and victims which according to various critics are the result of Utilitarian philosophy of the times. John Stuart Mill defines *Utilitarianism* as a theory based on the principle that "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce reverse of happiness." Mill further argues that people's achievement of goals and ends should be counted as part of their happiness. Though everything cannot be measured by same standards and critics believed that happiness itself is a complex process. In the utilitarian view one ought to maximize the overall good – that is, consider the good of others as well as one's own good. The good consists of pleasure a psychological state. G.E. Moore (1873-1958) criticized this view of Stuart Mill's general happiness that is a good to the aggregate of all persons. He asserts:

Mill has made as naïve and artless a use of the naturalistic fallacy as anybody could desire. "Good", he tells us, means "desirable" does not mean "able to be desired" as "visible" means "able to be seen." The desirable means that ought to be desired; just as the detestable means not what can be but what ought to be detested. . . .(Moore, PE, 66-7)

Education can bring change in outlook and attitude of a person and also helps to boost the confidence. However, to impart education in order to help students develop skills that drive better jobs, better lives and hence brings prosperity is actually the main problem of the present accreditation systems. What if one despite doing a lot of hard work and having appropriate qualification is unable to seize an opportunity for oneself? How would such systems analyse the growth of these students? The necessary criterion for accreditation includes the placement of the student and the biggest drawback is to associate knowledge with value. Such systems have actually confined the mental growth of people. They are restricted to view the world around them as they have been asked to perceive it. Such practices promote prejudices and is constantly transforming the world of childhood freedom into a mental dungeon. These agencies as put forth by Joel Morkan in a discussion on Wordsworth's *Prelude* Book-V for advocating improvements in education are "camouflaging an elaborate set of controls beneath a surface appearance of freedom and spontaneity" (61). There appears only an illusion of liberty and everything in these systems appear to be calculated.

Through *Hard Times* Charles Dickens also makes his readers reflect on crude realities of education, where students were constantly fed with facts. In fact, the term used for young students by Dickens is "little pitchers" and who

were to be galvanized and to be filled with facts up to the brim. It is essential to understand that the young minds are like pitchers and we the educationists are the potters and it is our duty to give them appropriate shape for the better future of our country. F.R. Leavis views *Hard Times* as Charles Dickens' best work and "a moral fable." He asserts, "Yet, if I am right, of all Dickens's works it is the one that has all the strength of his genius, together with the strength none of the others can show – that of a completely serious work of art" (*The Great Tradition*, 227). The novel begins with:

'NOW, WHAT I WANT is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and rule out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, Sir!' (3)

Thomas Gradgrind is portrayed as a pragmatic person having practical approach to life and education system by his method of only dispensing hard and obstinate facts to the children. Facts form the essence of Gradgrind's philosophy and the philosophy of many academicians and educationists who provide for the children's rational needs to an extent that they lose their creativity. When students were asked by a gentleman in *Hard Times* if they would "paper the room with representations of horses" (6) to which the answer of many were in affirmative yet many were able to assess through the expression of the gentleman that the answer should be 'No'. Hence, the ability to imagine is tamed by such people and institutions. Moreover, the gentleman's reply that, "Do you ever see horses walking up and down the sides of rooms in reality – in fact? Do you?" (6) is somehow similar to the linear equation where the answer is either right or wrong and in such logical or rather factual thought process there is no room left for skeptics. What purpose such education serves? All these aspects in a manner insist children to give up their innovation and accept the monotony of the systems. The students are continuously been assessed on the basis of hard facts rather than their imagination and creative faculty. The facts are instilled inside them to such an extent that every source of ambiguity is completely rooted out. "No little Gradgrind had ever seen a face in the moon; it was up in the moon before it could speak distinctly" (9). According to Hobsbaum, "*Hard Times* [...] is Dicken's attack upon the system by which the claims of human beings are trampled in a general melee" (187). Gradgrind and his philosophy is useful in creating robots and not human beings. Human beings have

been endowed with the faculty of imagination which help them in innovation and creation and more than that it helps them to make this world a better place to live. However, such philosophies are hugely responsible for shaping the world and children into mechanical beings who do not find pleasure in pursuing what they are doing. The present education system is a 'model' which Gradgrind and people like him find considerably satisfactory. In fact, the place named Coketown inhabited by such mechanical people, also epitomise the negative aspects and reflect boring and dull lifestyle. The depiction of Coketown is noteworthy as it is a town of 'red brick sacred to fact.' In this town all the buildings are so much alike that without reading the names inscribed above them one might not be able to distinguish among them. The author delineates Coketown thus:

All the public inscriptions in the town were painted alike, in severe characters of black and white. The jail might have been the infirmary, and infirmary might have been the jail, the town-hall might have been either, or both, or anything else, for anything that appeared to the contrary in the graces of their construction. Fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the material aspect of the town; fact, fact, fact, everywhere in the immaterial. The M'Choakumchild school was all fact, and the school of design was all fact, and the relations between master and man were all fact, and everything was fact between the lying-in hospital and cemetery, and what you couldn't state in figures, . . . (19)

Therefore, this town of machinery in its architecture and layout have no individuality and the people of the town are also depicted as parts of a machine in their movements and repeated actions. Additionally, everything in the Coketown is denied its uniqueness. The 'Hands' (workers) of this place are manipulated, shaped and trained for service and they have also lost their individual identity like Coketown. Hence such system only produces subjected and practiced bodies and minds. The hard facts are only brutalising everything around.

Hard Times depicts the inhumanities of Victorian era which finds parallel to current thinking fostered and sanctioned by the philosophy of education. The classroom appears monotonous, redundant, uninteresting, wearisome and mind-numbing. Dickens also mentions and somewhere admits that how Gradgrind and his monologue at the beginning of the novel makes the schoolroom, "a plain, bare, monotonous vault" (3). Dickens represented Thomas Gradgrind repellent, nevertheless respectable. He doesn't want his children to place doubtful speculation on anything. When Louisa in a conversation with her brother says, 'Tom, I wonder' to which Gradgrind

immediately intervened and said, "Louisa, never wonder" (38-39). Thomas Gradgrind is a typical example of mechanical art. He believes that every query can be resolved through the means of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. Bounderby is also the by-product of similar ideologies. Josiah Bounderby 'banker, merchant, manufacturer,' also believes that facts alone are worth learning, and the world of Gradgrind and Bounderby appear inhumane and hard.

Imagination which is an important creative faculty has retreated into the deep fissure of the earth's surface. The children grow up learning facts like if the visuals of the apples are red so they draw and colour the apple red only. The innocence is trained from the nascent stage to depict and represent the world as it is. Humans are therefore prone to be affiliated to the comfort of what is already known to them. They get uncomfortable in accepting the existence of green colour apple. They were evaluated and marked in the examinations on the basis of these hard facts and hence hegemonized into the system. Sissy Jupe in *Hard Times* when asked for the definition of a horse, and she was unable to do that so Gradgrind remarked:

... Girl number twenty possessed of no facts in reference to one of the commonest animals! Some boy's definition of a horse. Bitzer, yours. . . .

'Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.' Thus (and much more) Bitzer. (*Hard Times*, 5)

Sissy Jupe was born among the people whose livelihood relies on over the horses but such knowledge is irrelevant according to Gradgrind. Bitzer is made programmable which according to F.R. Leavis, is "the model pupil, on the button's being pressed, promptly vomits up the genuine article" (229). The education system of a society is related to the total social system of that society. It prepares the generations according to the needs and goals of the society concerned. The purpose of such education as portrayed and projected by Thomas Gradgrind and his model pupil Bitzer for a system which require mechanical labour. The present system of education is more or less working on the same principle of facts. According to the academicians, the education system performs the function of social control and social change and also fosters conformity up to certain limit to an individual. It also encourages critical judgement in the individual in order to accept and alter to the change. Yet the system promoted in the industrial and scientific time period to certain degree is based on facts and only facts. The Gradgrind

philosophy finds easy parallel in contemporary system of education. Hence children should be analysed on the basis of skills and measuring is the only way to comprehend that our children are learning. Assessment helps the students and teachers to analyse the process of learning.

The fundamental philosophy of these systems henceforth is governing philosophy. According to scholars such systems develop the habit of defining what needs to be known and directives are accordingly formed and framed. Judgements are passed, not reached in such circumstances and answers are accepted without argument. Such systems are paralysing the students. They are more calculative, self-interested and unsatisfied. Sissy Jupe in *Hard Times* represents freedom, vitality, goodness and emotions whereas Louisa, Bitzer and Thomas appears to be dull, unhappy and unsatisfied. The circus athletes are dextrous in horse riding and display adroitness of the kind which brings confidence and poise in one's life. The skills that they display express vital human impulse and they also minister to vital human needs.

There were two or three handsome young women among them, with two or three husbands, and their two or three mothers, and their eight or nine little children, who did the fairy business when required. The father of one of the families was in the habit of balancing the father of another of the families on the top of a great pole; the father of the third family often made pyramid of both those fathers, with Master Kidderminster for the apex, and himself for the base; all the fathers could dance upon rolling casks, stand upon bottles, catch knives and balls, twirl hand-basins, ride upon anything, jump over everything, and stick at nothing. . . . Yet there was a remarkable gentleness and childishness about these people, a special inaptitude for any kind of sharp practice, and an untiring readiness to help and pity one another, deserving often of as much respect, and often of as much generous construction, as the everyday virtues of any class of people in the world. (28-29)

Dickens appreciates the circus and its people and associates them with various virtues and qualities. He emphasises that not just reasoning yet imagination is an important factor which determines the progress of an individual. Dickens through the failed relationship of Louisa and Bounderby highlights the fallacy of the utilitarian system and its collapse in front of its promoter Thomas Gradgrind, "the pride of his heart and the triumph of his system, lying, an insensible heap, at his feet" (167). Not only Louisa and Bounderby represents the downfall of utilitarianism but also Gradgrind's

son Tom who has not left any stone unturned to meet his selfish ends. He has manipulated and deceived his own sister in the process. Not only that but Tom has failed his father and the system in which he believed and trusted when he committed robbery in the bank where he was employed. He has turned into a bored and sullen whelp. When asked by Gradgrind how he did it? He opened his mouth to make a cutting retort:

'How was what done?' moodily answered the son.

'This robbery,' said the father, raising his voice upon the word.

'I forced the safe myself overnight, and shut it up ajar before I went away. I had had the key that was found made long before. I dropped in that morning, that it might be supposed to have been used. I didn't the money all at once. I pretended to put my balance away every night, but I didn't. Now you know all about it.'

...

'I don't see grumbled the son. So many people are employed in situations of trust; so many people, out of so many, will be dishonest. I have heard you talk, a hundred times, and it's being a law. How can I help laws? You have comforted others with such things, father. Comfort yourself!' (218)

It is truly ironic that utilitarian education system has actually facilitated learning, or enhanced skills, and values. Whereas Bitzer is the real triumph of the utilitarian system.

... Bitzer, still holding the paralysed culprit by the collar, stood in the Ring, blinking at his old patron through the darkness of the twilight. 'Bitzer,' said Mr Gradgrind, broken down and miserably submissive to him, 'have you a heart?'

'The circulation sir,' returned Bitzer, smiling at the oddity of the question, 'couldn't be carried on without one. No man, sir, acquainted with the facts established by Harvey relating to the circulation of the blood, can doubt that I have a heart.'

'Is it accessible,' cried Mr Gradgrind, 'to any compassionate influence?'

'It is accessible to Reason, sir,' returned the excellent young man. 'And to nothing else.' (220)

Gradgrind's system of education has been a complete failure in human terms. Gradgrind sees in the end, the grotesque reality of the character formed

through such unreasonable methodologies opted to teach facts. Though many critics of the novel have been disappointed by the way the issues of facts and fancy have been conclusively sewn up from the start. Yet it is an important parameter and worth a careful thought. It is important to understand that this conflict between fact and fancy is a frame and under which many more human urgencies are to be found teeming. As put forth by scholars the rift between parent and children, the inability to understand the problems of the employer and employee, the loss of compassion among humanity and forming and raising one's identity solely on lies (Bonderby) are some of the psychological problems that are faced in general by such systems. The growing fundamentalism is what seems to be problematic, in today's educational policies. In the present education system, the fact-based neutrality hides behind objectivity. It is pertinent therefore to return to basics movement, as the increasing partisans of such agencies have collapsed the process of inquiry in the guise of 'Facts'. It is high time that as academicians and educationists we must look into the matter seriously as this business of imparting knowledge has made the people lesser human and they have lost many compassionate qualities.

Works Cited

- Dickens, Charles. *Hard Times*. Pearson Longman, 2004.
- Leavis, F. R. "Hard Times: An Analytic Note." *The Great Tradition: George Eliot Henry James Joseph Conrad*. George W. Stewart, 1950. 227-248.
- Mill, John Stuart. *Utilitarianism*. Ed. Roger Crisp. Oxford University Press, 1998. Web. 15 June 2014.
- Moore, G.E. *Principia Ethica*. Prometheus Books, 1988. Web. 12 Jan 2013.
- Plato. *The Republic*. Penguin Books, 1987.
- Williams, Mukesh, ed. *Charles Dickens: Hard Times*. Worldview, 1999.
- Wu, Duncan, ed. *Romanticism: A Critical Reader*. Blackwell, 1995.
- Hobsbaum, Philip. *A Reader's Guide to Charles Dickens*. Reader's Guide Series. Syracuse University Press, 1998. Web. 14 Jan 2013.
- "Fact And Fancy In Hard Times English Literature Essay." All Answers Ltd. ukessays.com, November 2018. Web. 12 February 2019. <<https://www.ukessays.com/essays/english-literature/fact-and-fancy-in-hard-times-english-literature-essay.php?vref=1>>.