Mother or Monster?: Portrayal of Motherhood and Emphasizing the Need for Good Parenting in the Novels of Charles Dickens

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Much critical attention has been devoted to the depiction of women, and especially mothers, in the novels of Dickens. Just as the bitter sufferings of his own childhood days find their way into most of his novels, making them deeply moving reads, so also his relationships with women, beginning with his mother, shape the fabric of and the psychological depths in his novels. Looking at all his mature novels, one easily locates a pattern of deep misogyny on the one hand for women, especially mothers, and presence of affectionate father figures on the other hand. It has been pointed out that, 'Dickens beats, burns, scars, and strikes with paralysis and muteness numerous bitchy mothers and surrogate mothers in his novels' (MacKnight 42). The characters of Mrs. Barbary (*Bleak House*), Mrs. Skewers (*Dombey and Son*), Miss Havisham and Mrs. Joe Gargery (*Great Expectations*) are made to suffer physical and mental trauma in the course of the novels, often ending in their deaths or sinking to mere vegetable existence. This desire to torture, maim, destroy the mother-figure actually points to the dormant feeling of neglect and abuse suffered at the hands of a whimsical and insufficient mother. By making his fictional mothers and mother surrogates, who often abuse or warp the minds of the helpless children and orphans under their tutelage, suffer Dickens probably felt that he had secured his revenge against his own mother.

The world of Dickens's novels are teeming with such instances of callous, tormenting and deficient mothers such as Mrs. Jellyby – in Bleak House – where the narrator bitterly criticizes her 'telescopic philanthropy' for the natives of Boorioboola-Gha resulting in utter neglect of and indifference to her own brood of children who are left to fend for themselves and constantly exposed to the most dreadful catastrophes. Francois Basch comments:

> The unfortunate Peepy, never yet washed in his life, periodically disappears or gets his head stuck between iron railings; and the eldest daughter spends all her time looking after the huge correspondence of a mother who totally neglects the daughter's physical and moral education. (Basch 54)

The state of the Jellyby household, its inhospitable and uncomfortable ambience is comically exaggerated by Dickens to indict the mother and wife, Mrs. Jellyby, of negligence, which is made to appear almost criminal, held up as foil to the Victorian ideal of the uncomplaining, selfless and loving Madonna. Because of her engrossment in a distant cause, Mrs Jellyby is inattentive to the needs of her household which has, by degrees, turned into a place where everything has united in order to oppose human welfare – where the inhabitants are capable of being frozen to death with cold, or being suffocated with smoke, where meals are never properly cooked, the stair carpet is riddled with holes and the cupboards are stacked with dangerous and threatening objects. Dickens utilizes his comic imagination deftly to expose the exploitation of children by such women who fight for a 'mission' that oversteps the narrow definition of the role prescribed for them as wife and mother. Inevitably in Dickens's novels we

find insufficient or negligent biological mothers, against whom Dickens is bitterly vocal, juxtaposed with child-wives who display amazing potential of taking care of motherless families and households. Take the instance of Caddy or Little Dorrit, who are child-mothers! It has been pointed out and discussed at length by MacKnight Dickens's novels are replete with 'docile girl-women' whose devotion to their families and self-effacement is exemplary. They are modelled on the idealized women held up by the guide and conduct books of the time like those by Mrs Ellis or Dickens's own Household Words. What is significant is that none of these 'girl-women' are mothers in the direct narrative and are made mothers only in the final page of the novels which make the role inconspicuous. Dickens leaves the endings in a haze, a blurred image, probably signifying that he is,

> . . .not just reflecting and supporting the norms of behaviour for Victorian women in such characterizations; he is recapitulating the psychological process that created such norms, that made the majority of Victorians . . . fearful of the will of women and desirous of keeping women restrained. Through his monstrous mothers he shows the fearful tyranny of women that leads him to prefer selfless women, women who must not venture into assertiveness, lest they begin to seem like mothers (MacKnight 42)

For Dickens the proper sphere for woman was her home, amidst her husband and children, whose welfare was her prime duty. Emotional abuse of children was an issue that was close to Dickens's heart and one about which he wrote again and again in his novels. Patricia Ingham in her penetrative study of Dickens's attitude towards women and mothers points out the in his

work there is a marked attempt to dwarf the stature of those who give birth and an attempt to reverse the roles of child and deficient mother in his novels (Ingham 116), this is a feature clearly present in *Dombey and Son*, in Edith's response to her negligent mother at her deathbed, at Esther Summerson's forgiveness to Lady deadlock and even in Caddy's taking over the care of her siblings in place of their indifferent mother, in *Bleak House*. Ingham establishes a criterion, a sign, which she calls 'true mothers' to explain and situate Dickens's regard of feminity and motherhood. She says:

> The mechanics of evaluating women in Dickens are made plain here: the worse the child, the more highly regarded the mother who cherishes him; and the more highly regarded the surrogate mother who voluntarily acquires and nurtures dependants, the more disvalued the legal and biological mother who refuses to nurture even non-delinquent offspring. (Ingham 118)

In Dickens's fictional world thus, 'motherhood' becomes a fluid term which can be applied to and which can attach itself to any female irrespective of her age and marital status. The absence of biological mothers was made normal in the plots of Victorian novels due to the inordinately high rate of maternal death post-childbirth. The intensity of the neglect of family and children is however enhanced in his novels by the abdication from duty of biological mothers and in fact in the entire gamut of Dickens's work is interspersed with defining women by their ability to mother or nurture, and interestingly this quality is never found in those who have given birth, they in fact turn out to be selfish, self-seeking and monstrous. According to

Dickens 'the necessary condition of true motherhood is the acceptance of responsibility for the welfare of dependants' (Ingham 115).

Such deeply chauvinistic and narrow views, as expressed by him through the caricatures of Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Paradiggle and their philanthropic ventures may not make Dickens a popular novelist in a world which has witnessed several waves of feminist movements, but what still holds our attention to his novels is his sympathetic depiction of children and childhood. He of all the Victorian novelists, even in his negative views of biological mothers, was the foremost to point out the need of proper parenting for children to grow up into responsible and mentally fit adults. In an age which was combating the problems of illegitimacy, orphans, population explosion and high female-mortality rates, Dickens's novels were vehicles for spreading awareness as well as initiating social reforms, though admittedly often in a melodramatic fashion.

Shifting from such comic caricatures as those of Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Parradigle onto a more serious note, wherever possible Dickens punishes negligent mothers, deficient in the performance of the role expected of them. MacKnight comments, 'Dickens's conscious resentments against his mother, coupled with more subterranean hostilities, led him to silence, maim, kill or exclude mothers in every novel of his career' (Mac Knight 42). All the biographies Of Dickens point to the fact that his mother's allowing him to go to the blacking factory was looked upon him as a kind of betrayal, the smart of which left an indelible mark on his mind driving him again and again to create inadequate mothers, who fail to live up to the idealized

image of the mother ingrained in the minds of their children, and destroy them during the course of the novel. In *David Copperfield*, David's mother Clara distances him from herself by choosing to remarry and is then unable to protect him against the cruelty of the Murdstones. To the child David such knowledge that his cries and suffering do not move his mother in the way he expects her to react is indeed shocking. Even Pegotty, the servant of the Copperfields, is a better mother to David than his own. But for Clara the punishment is light, the vengeance sober as she is made to die in child birth. However, in the same novel we have the positive image of motherhood in David's aunt Betsy Trotwood, who clearly has never been a biological mother, who emerges as a good surrogate mother for David, indeed a rare occurrence in the Dickensian world where benevolent fathers and father figures are in abundance but there is a dearth of positive images of motherhood, with whom he finally feels anchored.

If Betsy Trotwood saves David from the miserable life of an orphan, Mrs. Joe Gargery, in *Great Expectations*, sees to it that her kid brother is made to feel guilty of surviving his parents and siblings, every moment of his life. A woman unattractive in appearance and unfeeling by nature, Dickens's cynical humour renders her as a callous woman. A woman without any children of her own, Georgina believed in bringing up Pip 'by hand' – a term to which Dickens adds a comical twist relating it to Mrs. Joe's practice of beating up Pip freely. Her apron stuck full of pins and needles denies her both feminine softness and maternal affection making her a bad mother surrogate for Pip. Shawna Dudley, in her thesis, comments:

> Pip himself knows that his sister is unjust and abusive, and these two qualities make her appear very un-maternal. She cares for him as far as his physical needs go, feeding his physical body, but she is greatly lacking in nurturing skills. Dickens takes Mrs. Joe's negative characterization even further when he describes her as wearing "a coarse apron, fastened over her figure behind with two loops, and having a square impregnable bib in front that was stuck full of pins and needles"… Mrs. Joe's prickly bib leaves one with the impression of an equally prickly personality. The word "impregnable" further negates her maternal qualities by seeming to say that no baby could ever be produced from such a woman. (Dudley 115)

It is then a slight amazement to see her beaten up by some unknown intruder, later in the novel, reducing this woman of a fiery temper and physical robustness to a mere vegetable. Pip's illogical sense of guilt for his sister's condition point towards the sub-conscious ill-will, which can definitely be justified, that he bore her and which he probably feels is the force that harmed her. In fact this guilt felt by Pip for the attack on Mrs Joe and the burning of Miss Havisham can be explained with what Melanie Klein had inferred in her attempts to locate the origins of adult feelings of hostility towards mother. She concludes that the ego develops through the process of internalization of the mother's breast by the child:

> The child feels that he concretely internalizes the breast and the milk it gives. Also there is in his mind already some definite connection between the breast and other parts and aspects of the mother . . . If this primal object, which is introjected, takes root in the ego with relative security, the basis for a satisfactory development is laid. (Fine 279-80)

However even when the mother has been internalized positively by the child it still experiences rage due to it frustrations and this rage is directed to towards the mother. The mother is the source of comfort but also the source of frustration for the child. Even by not answering the child's cries immediately or by not alleviating its discomfort she becomes the catalyst for aggressive feelings in the child and the child feels the impulses to destroy the very object of his desire and one who is connected in his mind with every experience good or bad. This gives rise to fantasies of tearing and biting in the child's mind, and the child comes to believe that he has actually inflicted such injury upon the mother and then has fantasies of making reparation to the mother. This can be used to analyse Dickens's own relationship with his mother and his constant depiction of mothers as hurt, maimed and destroyed and the efforts to make up to them. Thus, when Pip feels guilty for the violent injury and death of his surrogate mothers we can understand that it is the outcome of his subterranean and latent anger towards them. MacKnight comments that:

> Dickens's many narrative can be interpreted in hi light; they often attack negative mother figures, but their very existence, Klein would argue, might be inspired by Dickens's desire to compensate for his hostilities toward his mother. (MacKnight 26).

For Pip's journey, until the very end of the novel when Joe and Biddy replace the parents that had failed him since his infancy, is a vain search for a mother-figure. From Mrs Joe to Miss Havisham – for Pip it is akin to falling from the frying pan into the fire! If the former

deprives him of love and maternal affection the latter is even more venomous as she inflicts scars on his self-esteem which affect him negatively in his adult life. However Miss Havisham's demented frolic at inflicting pain upon the impressionable Pip through Estella, a child whose mind and personality she has warped to mould her into an instrument of vengeance against the male sex, is finally punished through the accidental fire that burns away the decadent material objects around her along with her unholy motives. Pip and Estella can never regain what insensitive and insufficient mother surrogates have taken away from them, but Dickens does not let these offenders off without some kind of punishment, be it fate-ordained, because he never forgave his own mother for wrecking his dreams.

The other notable orphan, who moves through the maze of life being manipulated by surrogate parents with insidious intentions, is Esther Summerson in *Bleak House.* Although it is more often women, the surrogate mothers who bear the brunt of Dickens's bitterness, in a rare instance in *Bleak House*, it is a man who is exposed as selfish and self-gratifying in his raising of the orphan Esther. It is thus, possible to state that Dickens is not just a blind misogynist but a humane artist whose personal experience of parental insensitivity had rendered him sensitive to the issue of child abuse and through his fiction he lashes at mothers in particular, and parents in general, who destroy their wards' lives through their own selfish hankerings. Thus, Esther begins her early life by imbibing her godmother's sense of shame at her illegitimacy. Later John Jarndyce adopts her as a young girl, pays for her education, and then invites her to live with him. He proposes marriage soon after she arrives and admits that he wanted her for a

wife the first time he saw her as a child. Esther accepts his proposal, even though she needs Jarndyce to be a father-figure or a mother substitute but not a husband. Jarndyce manipulates Esther's emotions and plays on her feelings of gratitude for his many years of support. What makes Jarndyce particularly hateful is the occasion on which he makes the offer of marriage. Barbara Gottfried writes:

> Jarndyce chooses not simply the moment when Esther feels most grateful and obliged to him, but the moment of her greatest sense of her own vulnerability, when she is most likely to say yes because of her awareness of the attenuation of her circumstances and possibilities, her lack of resources for independence and strength. Thus Jarndyce's proposal brings up for Esther not simply the disadvantages of her illegitimacy and loss of looks, but the difficulty of her position as a dependent, particularly with regard to her continuing in his household without any "official" status (Gottfried 193)

He thus, uses adoption to gain not only a daughter, but also a wife. It is also perhaps another rare novel which shows a father figure in a bad light. Thus, we observe, as Dickens moved from his earlier novels to later the hope for the child to secure a positive mother (read parent) figure gradually dwindled.

There are innumerable such instances in the entire gamut of Dickens's novels which show his work as being capable of being interpreted with the mothering theories of our times, which accept mother-blaming as normal and necessary for the child in forming an identity separate from that of the mother's. Beside such vengefulness for mothers is juxtaposed the

benign influence of father figures like Joe Gargery, Mr. Micawber or Mr. Pegotty, suggesting an alternative to an exclusively mother-dominated upbringing, as an antidote to the negative influences of the mother, with exception of *Bleak House*. Such views on Dickens's novels expressed in this article may give a lay reader an assumption that Dickens was a misogynist, a man who had no sympathy for women that would be a wrong assumption about a man who was behind the founding and upkeep of Urania Cottage – a sort of rehabilitation centre for prostitutes, offering them a ray of hope for returning to a life of respectability. What makes Dickens portray mothers or mother-figures as monsters in his novels is his own ideological construct of mothers as completely selfless and loving, an expectation which his own mother could not satisfy. Thus Dickens's novels often create a contrast to the widely circulated image of the mother as the Madonna, in Victorian conduct books, guidebooks and through the image projected to society by Queen Victoria herself, only to diffuse the qualities of ideal maternity from the rigid boundaries of biological motherhood to any woman who possesses the qualities of wisdom, unstinted love and selflessness for family and children.

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