

IN CONVERSATION

'Sensationalism made Dickens popular ...'

This year marks a special moment for literature lovers around the world. With the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall leading the global celebrations of Charles Dickens's 200th birth anniversary in Dickens's birthplace in Portsmouth, fans of Dickens's novels and journals have been observing his works this year with a re-visit to Victorian England.

As part of this literature festivity, the Department of English and Humanities of BRAC University invited everyone to a day-long seminar on Charles Dickens's written masterpieces called "Remapping Dickens for the Contemporary World" on June 28.

Under the light of how modern Bangladeshis can find a reflection of our society through Dickens's writings, Ms. Firdous Azim, Chairperson of the English Department of BRAC University, talks to Shayera Moula of The Daily Star about the aesthetic sparks combined with social realism that Dickens produces so vividly that readers can remain hooked to his literature even today.

How does reading Charles Dickens allow modern readers to understand our society better?

That's a difficult question to answer because literature is not really just aimed at understanding society but at the same time there has to be some relevance for the enjoyment of the pleasure in reading to continue. When we read and teach Dickens we often find the relevance staring at us since it is full of the scenes of the streets we see today as we look out the window. His novels reflect the class disparity we experience on a daily basis as well as the gender questions that we are made to negotiate. It is all there even though it was written in Victorian England.

His work is also the first example of popular culture --- attracting a large readership while blending social issues with aesthetic concerns. For the purpose of our students, we recently had posted a passage from *Oliver Twist* on our website and asked students to write stories, essays and take photographs of children on the streets of Dhaka.

The series of stories and photos that were read and on display at the day-long event at BRAC University projected social awareness which really did spring out of the passage from *Oliver Twist*. In the end Dickens's words facilitated discussion on a lot of current issues. Even a representative from Unicef and a

student from the Business School Dept. of BRAC University, presenting an overview of the Empower Energy Project aimed at mainstreaming natural forms of energy, started with quotes from Dickens's novels. Although neither of them was a literature major, they contributed to the day-long seminar at BRAC University on "Remapping Dickens for the Contemporary World" with connections between Dickens and our society, letting us realise that many of the issues that should have been eradicated a long time ago have remained true, unfortunately.

What did you mean by his work being the 'first example of popular culture and wide readership'?

Dickens is a 19th century writer which is basically a period where popular culture was written culture in the shape of newspapers and novels. Newspapers and journalism had really found their feet in 19th century England, where news was not just reports but also news with views -- features as we know them today. Dickens wrote *Sketches by Boz*, and later was an editor himself. So he was very involved in a scene that attracted readership directly driven by commercial interests. After all, newspapers and journals had to sell in a very competitive market.

The novelist Dickens thus also had to make money through his work and I believe he was very aware of the market for novels and journalism, where he played the market incredibly well. The elements of "Victorianism" that we may find boring today -- the mentality, the tearful death scenes, charitable virtue vs. vice scenes -- were all playing into the gallery as a magnet to his reader's demands.

These stories appeared in a series though journals and newspapers. So we can almost feel that they mirrored what the soap operas of modern times do. His stories would end at a point that would keep readers hooked for the next instalment the following week. The reading scenes, we can imagine, were like TV viewing where the entire family would sit around the fireplace with one person reading aloud. This was a shared middle class pleasure and Dickens pandered to the booming readership of the Victorian setting.

America was also a huge arena of readership for him and the England colonies had access to his work. We know that the rising *bhadrolok*

class of Calcutta was an avid part of this global readership.

His work was both entertainment and social critique. As literature students we are made more aware that Victorian England had two nations -- one, a prospering centre and riches of the worlds and the other side, very visible but ignored -- the poverty on the streets. So even though Dickens was not aware of the colonial deprivations, he was very conscious of what was happening in his own nation. While enjoying the prosperity of middle-class Britain, he was still disturbed by what lay around him.

England lived with a spectre of revolution with constant industrial unrest and memories



Firdous Azim

of the French Revolution only too visible. In the 1840s Britain had itself witnessed the Charter Movement. The formula of the "Victorian Compromise" can be seen to have arisen out of handling the social contradictions of the age. Victorian compromise in literature often expressed itself through the portrayal of romance, sentimentality, goodness, virtue -- elements that keep the violence at bay.

Did Dickens' portrayal of power, politics and poverty have any impact on the social reforms of the time?

Yes, it did. Maybe not directly but at the time when Dickens was writing, the British Parliament was enacting many laws. The reforms led not to the 8-hr working day but the 12-hr one. The notion of 'overtime' for

workers and adequate work for women was also introduced. Issues about children and schooling were also on the rise.

Dickens shared in these concerns and even worked with a home for prostitutes -- referred to as 'fallen' women -- called the Urania Cottage, where he helped troubled women learn how to read and write, gain domestic skills, and have independent sources of income.

The national growth of such awareness came mainly from newspaper reportage with which Dickens was involved. Parliament itself had sent out people for investigation and finally produced *blue books* -- so if you research on Victorian England, you will be reading their journals, the parliamentary blue books and Dickens.

What made his literature unique?

Sensationalism made his work popular. This element that critics might sneer at has actually made him popular through the ages. He has a fabulous sense of character portrayal -- both serious and as caricatures. They both somewhat appear together and that combination makes him exceptional.

I often feel that we don't get his humour today but in its own time it was potent. But even then when we read his *Great Expectations*, in the way he describes Joe Gargery. The humour has a lot of compassion in it -- the combination of both actually helps draw out the character further.

Mr. Jaggers is, however, described in grotesque proportions which lets the reader be amused yet brings the character to light. John Wemmick, on the other hand, is well divided between his image at work versus at home. The reader gets what essentially are the main elements of the character, and though today we may not laugh out loud as the Victorian readers may have, these portraits convey the kernel of the characters.

Which modern writers follow Dickens's style today?

Charles Dickens' equation of realism and romance and gothic was a stock-in-trade of the Victorian genre of novel writing. That said, the *éclat* and the *panache* with which Dickens wrote is difficult to mimic.

Contemporary times are a lot more post-modern in their approach. When we think of the writings of Rushdie, for example, we think of the 18th century and not the 19th. The portrayal of society is not done in a social

realist manner, but through magical realism. So social realism may be making a comeback but it does not have the *grotesquety*, almost dark humour, that Dickens was able to portray so well.

Amitav Ghosh is a social realist, but where is the humour or sense of wonder in his work? Dickens has a fantastic blend of realism and magic realism because the disproportions in social portrayals carry you into an unreal world. Magical realist writers can be thought of as Dickens's descendants, and although they wouldn't call themselves that, I would think they do have elements of Dickens in their writing style.

Today's writers mainstream politics whereas Dickens dealt with more social forms of debates. The writer as social protest became much more prominent in the early 20th century, whereas Dickens was more of a social reflector of the politics of his time.

Which Dickens novel have you constantly gone back to over time and why?

Great Expectations. It tells a story that resonate this journey from the village to the city. This is a very common experience which he tells us through the eyes of a young boy.

In Bangladesh I see all these garments workers and a lot of them have made this journey. It would be wonderful if someone would write a novel based on that experience, perhaps a more sympathetic, compassionate outlook with more feeling.

A lot of my students come from the villages and live in DU or JU hostels. I would love to have someone imaginatively re-create, and I hope one of them someday do, this journey from the country to the city. Even with an easier route to the city these days, it is still a long, difficult journey by a greater mass.

There are lots of stories to be told of this migration and of course Pip comes to a very prosperous ending. But for us the struggle continues in another form or another place. And what you have to become is something that your home back in the village never asked for. So you are struggling, as Pip did, to become another -- in his case a gentleman. You struggle against other odds.

And so I look at all these young girls in our city and simply become wowed at how there are these *Great Expectations* all around us.

FICTION

Boomerang.....

MALEKA PARVEEN

"Then you're now living with your parents?" Manjur uttered the sentence with a questioning tone to be confirmed about what Shaila had been saying to him for the last ten minutes or so.

"Yes. After hearing everything, do you think I should continue staying with him?"

"No, I can't say anything right now. But, before taking any final decision, you'll have to first think about the future of your child. Because of your hasty decision or your husband's fault whatever, in the long run your child will suffer the consequences. Do you get my point?"

"Yes, I know. But I also know that maybe ultimately I won't be able to put up with this shameful life anymore. I can't compromise my sense of self-respect with his promiscuity. Tell me what you would do in my situation. I told you that he is always like this, though I didn't have the slightest doubt about his character before our marriage. I found him so honest, so compassionate; his morale in every sense was so high that now I just can't believe he is the same Monir I was so infatuated about. You won't believe for the last two months I couldn't sleep for one single hour at night. I had bad dreams, --- nightmares. My daughter sleeps with my mother. I can't even look at her innocent face..." Shaila appeared to be choking.

"I understand. But you should take some more time. I didn't hear anything about what your husband has to say about all this. What does he want?"

"What does he want?" Shaila repeated the question to herself. "Well, he wants to have his cake and eat it too. He wants to continue living his life as he is doing now. But he has indicated that if I break up with him, he will take away my daughter with him. He boldly says that legally he is safe, that the law is on his side. On this point, I found my hands totally bound. Can I allow my daughter growing up with that degenerate guy? No doubt he loves his daughter, but he loves himself more than anything else". Shaila was fuming.

Some moments of silence followed. Shaila was quiet, not decided about what more to say about her troubled married life to someone who had been one of her earlier suitors, but who she rejected outright over his not-that-respectable-and-prosperous social status and family background, though they were colleagues in the same office, holding similar official rank. Ironically enough, he has now become the most reliable 'friend, philosopher and guide' to Shaila. Apart from her family members and some close relatives, Manjur is the only person who knows about the turbulence Shaila has been going through for quite sometime, to be precise, since her marriage. In between the busy office hours, these days Shaila has made it a regular affair to come to Manjur's room, to have a cup of coffee or tea together and give full vent to her

feelings.

Sometimes, without even waiting for Manjur to ask the very common query of '*kemon acho*', on entering his room, Shaila thudded on the chair and began like '*ami ar parchhina*'. At those moments, though very much aware of almost everything about what she was experiencing in her conjugal life, if not just another new episode with more grave concern tormented her at that very moment, Manjur rather reluctantly asked her what it was again she was suffering from. In fact, he put the question to her only to avoid hearing the same old tale. To be frank, nowadays Manjur sometimes got annoyed inwardly when Shaila took more than her usual time sitting in his room and talking with him, though he had nothing much to offer her in consolation. He was only a very patient and attentive listener as was evident from his asking occasional questions, indicating his careful attention to whatever she had to say. One such moment came now when none of them had anything more to express to each other. Shaila looked at her watch and, all of a sudden pushing the chair backward, she jumped up, her face rather sombre.

"Okay, Manjur, that's all for today. I'm really sorry to have taken so much of your time. I believe you understand my mental condition. There's none I can go to and say, 'See what I'm going through'. Even my parents sometimes get irritated. Though they do not say anything clearly, but I can see through them. The tragedy is they can't throw me out because I'm their very own flesh and blood".

In an emotionally throttling voice, Shaila left his room and Manjur heaved a sigh of great relief. He didn't know how long he would have to endure this sort of torture from Shaila -- this very Shaila who five years ago repudiated him so rudely when he proposed to her, once developing quite an intimate relationship immediately after joining the same office together. At the time he felt bad, very bad, though gradually he overcame everything and now Shaila sought temporary solace in his soothing sounds. Irony of fate indeed! A not-pleasant-at all smile hung on Manjur's blackish thick dry lips.

It's Friday evening and Manjur is watching cricket on TV. It is a one day match between South Africa and Australia. Being still a bachelor, he lives with his mother, an old lady of about sixty-five years of age, who is giving all her efforts to finding a young beautiful wife for her younger son. At home, Manjur is known to be a very short-tempered man, a haughty person by nature, a trait inherited from his late father. He always wants everything ready at hand when he requires anything necessary.

His office people do not have any wee bit of idea about this side of his character, certainly not a very good thing to know about an apparently gentle-looking and well-behaved man. He is regarded there as one of the most modest officers who can remain calm and cool at even a very critical point of time when

someone else in his place might get easily exhausted or extremely annoyed. His forbearance and quiet nature are thus much praised by his office colleagues and staff members. That's why Shaila does not even hesitate to come to him, who for obvious reasons could have harboured any sort of malicious feeling towards her. And she seems to feel relaxed some way in revealing such intensely personal things to him which he might easily make a juicy story about, or at least could have shared with other colleagues in the office as groovy gossip stuff.

Though his eyes are now fixed on the TV screen showing an advertisement on a happy couple searching out the best flat for them to make it a nest of lifelong peace and happiness for the whole family, Manjur's flight of thought is having a backward-forward movement with occasional stand-by mood in his present state. Last night he had had a dream involving Shaila and, since he got up this morning, that dreamy spell had been casting its ominous sway over him like an overhanging bleak shadow which, though he is not enjoying at all, he is not being able to escape from either.

That a person cannot always be judged by the look, rather the mask, he puts on his face is a clichéd notion. Resultantly very often it can be misleading. And, amazingly enough, and damagingly as such, this is also applicable to Manjur, who, from the very first day Shaila began disclosing to him the unpleasant truths about her husband, has been sort of relishing her unhappiness as a price of his unrequited response. He is not at all worried about what Shaila is being tormented with. Why should he be? She herself picked Monir out of her many woosers and now she should face everything on her own. Of course, on a very sympathetic ground as a human being, he cannot speak out what he now feels for her, 'Yes, yes, you deserve it. Why do you come to tell me all this nonsense? Did I forget what you told me when I held out my hand to you? First, you laughed away, thinking I was just joking. But when you saw that I was really serious, you changed your attitude radically. In a very matter-of-fact tone and clear terms, you let me know that you considered me only as a very good friend, a reliable colleague, nothing more than that. You also lied to me that you had someone special even though I was damn sure that at the time there was no one you had an affair with. Now, I do not have enough time for listening to your monotonous tale. It's simply exhausting. Please, don't bother me any more with this very personal matter of yours'.

Manjur is rehearsing the harsh words contemptively. He wishes very much that he could pour out all the bitter words before Shaila the next time she comes to his room to once again pesther him with those disgusting loose stuff. The fact is, though, he will not be able to express his real feelings as it does not befit his outward gentlemanly costume. At this point of thinking, he stumbles and gets terribly upset. He has not anything at his disposal to avoid Shaila. And her badgering droning song! She will come time and again

and narrate her tale incessantly, something he has begun to violently hate. He feels as helpless as a caged bird. What can he possibly do to avoid listening to her? He also realises that Shaila, that very intelligent lady with a sharp presence of mind, has over the years lost her intuitive power to read other people's minds. If not, by this time she herself should have understood that it is not becoming for her personality to divulge her very intimate feelings and experiences to the man she once turned her back upon. 'No, I can't let this go on endlessly. I must tell her what I feel. It will be helpful for both of us. If she herself cannot see the point, I will have to show it myself. And then let her take a decision how she will make everything easy and normal'.

Manjur lies back comfortably once he has made up his mind. In a very light and happy mood, he feels like once again taking a cup of tea and calls out the boy servant in his house, 'Shariiiiiiiiiiiiif, make me another cup of tea and tell ma to have her dinner. I'll have mine later'.

Shaila is still in bed. Today is her birthday, but there is no one special to wish her. Of course, last night her mother and three-year old daughter kissed her, 'Happy birthday to you'. But that is not everything she longs for on this very auspicious day. For the last two years, Monir has totally ignored it and behaved deliberately in a manner as if there were nothing to make an occasion of this day. Shaila felt humiliated and kept quiet the whole day. Then, in bed at night when her daylong expectation gave in to sheer desperation, she asked him coldly whether he at all remembered that it was her birthday and he did not even wish her a very little good thing. 'So? What am I supposed to do on your birthday? Huh! Birthday? What do I care about it? I don't give it a fig for that matter. It's like every other day. Yes, it is. Do you hear, madam Shaila, it's like every other day? Birthday! Damn it! He clasped two pillows in his two hands and went towards the drawing room. It was in this way that her last two birthdays passed that made her sometimes feel she never been born.

Today also nothing mentionable is going to occur to her, Shaila knows for sure, if she herself does not take any initiative to arrange some kind of celebration on the day. What is there for her to drive away the depression she is undergoing? She doesn't want her old parents to know anything more about her inner conflict and dejection. They have already had too much of it. She has decided to behave herself before them, not to betray any distressing feeling which may upset them with resultant anxiety and worry. Then, how is she planning to not let her third-seventh birthday be off like any other routine day in her life?

Yes, a sudden flash of a happy smile moves across the beautifully carved-out lips of Shaila. She will invite Manjur this evening to have dinner with the whole family. Certainly, he will not decline to come, she believes from her heart. He is such a nice person. Then a shadow

makes its appearance on her face. What a mistake she has made by choosing Monir as her life-partner! Her subtle calculation failed totally. However, at that time no one could accumulate enough reasons to find fault with her choice. Apparently, Monir was the best among the short-listed grooms while Manjur was next to the last one. And, now within a time span of only five years, the choice list has dramatically gone upside down. Okay, there's none to point the finger at. It is her very own hard luck.

Shaila pulls herself out of the drowsy idleness and gets down from her bed to get ready for the day. She will not let her birthday go away silently for a scoundrel of her so-called husband. She herself is enough to adore it the way it should be. She looks for her mother in the other room where the old lady is trying to lull her granddaughter to sleep, which she always finds a difficult. Shaila sits beside the cot in which her three-year old daughter has just fallen into a deep sleep, enfolding a Barbie doll against her small chest like a caring mother. Shaila gets a bit emotional, her eyes becoming moist. But she controls herself immediately and looks at her mother keenly.

"Ma, do you remember Manjur?"
"Manjur? That colleague of yours who---"
"Yes, that Manjur. We're still good friends. Ma, if you don't object to, I want to ask him come home this evening to have dinner with us".

Shaila instantly intervenes in her mother's attempt to recognise the right person. She feels abashed, thinking that her mother still keeps him alive in her active memory. It also swiftly crosses her mind that it was her mother only who took a positive attitude to Manjur's proposal. For some reasons still unknown, she did not show that much interest in Monir while others, including her father and herself, were so full of praise for him.

A wrinkle or two appear on her mother's forehead. She holds her lips tight and thinks for sometime before pronouncing any decisive approval or disapproval her daughter seeks from her.

"I'm not sure if it'll be wise for you to call him at this critical juncture of your married life. I think you understand what I mean. It's fine you're good friends. But you should keep that friendship within the office boundary, not beyond that. You are now facing a very difficult situation. Your husband and you have not been on speaking terms for over two months. People around us know and notice everything. If at this moment you invite a male colleague of yours to your house, it'll not be looked upon easily, not by your husband, not by anyone, not even by me. So, think once more. If you just seek my opinion, I would be very clear-cut to say no. It'll not be good for anyone of you".

(To be continued)

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