

The Sociology of Literature: A Study of George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*

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Abstract

The contemporary text oriented literary theories are absorbed in textual or structural criticism. The proponents of these theories neglected the major determinants of literature. They regarded literature as a largely self-enclosed, self-sustaining enterprise or a world-in-itself. As a result the extrinsic approach like 'the sociology of literature' remained marginalized. In fact the sociology of literature is a growing body of critical theory. It studies the sociology of the writer, the relationship between the literary works and society, the social determinants of literature and the conditions of the production of literary works. This research paper is an attempt to explain the role of the determinants in the existence and success of the non-fictional work of George Orwell. It is found that personality traits of George Orwell, his tramping experience in Paris and London, the societal situations of the day, the ideology of the publishers and responses of the critics and readers are important in the creation and success of George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*.

KEYWORDS: Sociology of literature, George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, gatekeepers of literature, determinants of literature.

1. Introduction:

The contemporary text oriented literary theories comprising Formalism, New Criticism, Structuralism and Post structuralism regard literature as a largely self-enclosed, self-sustaining enterprise or a world-in-itself. These theories oppose the prevailing interest of scholars and critics in the social context of literature and biographies of authors. The proponents of these theories neglect the major the determinants of literature such as social institutions, the personality and creativity of the writer, responses of the critics and readers and the ideology of the publishers and readers. They analyze literary works in terms of their inner structure. Ferdinand de Saussure's *A Course in General Linguistics* (1915) laid the foundation of this intrinsic approach and opened up a fresh way of looking at literature as an independent entity. Influenced by Saussurian linguistics, Russian Formalism attempted to introduce objectivity in the realm of literature. I. A. Richards also pioneered the technique of practical criticism. The similar kind of decontextualized objective reading was made popular in America by New Critics. Structuralism, a parallel development during the same period, considered a text only in terms of language and its system of conceptions. However, by 1970 the basic tenets of structuralism were questioned by post-structuralism and the serious challenge of deconstruction which emphasized the 'open-endedness' and 'undecidability' of the text was emerged by Derrida. As all these new theories were absorbed in textual or structural criticism, the extrinsic

approach like ‘the sociology of literature’ remained marginalized. However, in recent years the critics like Lucien Goldman, Leo Lowenthal, Robert Escarpit, M. C. Albrecht, Terry Eagleton, John Hall, Alan Swing wood, Diana Lawrenson, Anthony Giddens, etc. developed sociology of literature on the basis of a new formula. It studies both the personality traits of the writer and the relationship between the writer, his works and the social order of the day. So this new formula is regarded as ‘an integral part of the social order’.

Eric Arthur Blair (25 June 1903 – 21 January 1950), better known by his pen name **George Orwell**, was an English journalist, novelist and essayist. His work is marked by keen intelligence and wit, a profound awareness of social injustice, an intense, revolutionary opposition to totalitarianism, a passion for clarity in language and a belief in democratic socialism. He wrote during the period of waning imperialism and increasing totalitarianism. However, his non-fictional works throw light on his experience, realistic picture of the contemporary society and the traits of his personality. His major non-fictional works are: *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) and, *Homage to Catalonia* (1938). In the present paper his first non-fictional work is discussed in the light of a newly developing theory of literature called the sociology of literature. So before discussing the sociology of George Orwell’s *Down and Out in Paris and London*, it seems necessary to have a glance on the theoretical premises of the sociology of literature.

2. Sociology of literature:

The sociology of literature is a growing body of critical theory that studies literary works in the context of social institutions and gatekeepers who determine the literary works. It focuses its attention upon the relationship between a literary work and the social structure in which it is created. It examines the relationship between the artist and society, the sociology of the writer and the conditions of creation and production of literary works. The sociology of literature, thus, helps to understand the socio-economic situations, the political issues, the personality and creativity of writers, the relationship between certain thoughts and cultural configurations in which they occur and the several social determinants of the existence and success of literary works. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (1990) defines the term ‘sociology of literature’ as,

“Sociology of literature is a branch of literary study that examines the relationship between literary works and their social context, including patterns of literacy, kinds of audience, modes of publications and dramatic presentation and social class positions of authors and readers. Originating in nineteenth century France with works by Madam de Stale and Hippolyte Taine, the sociology of literature was revived in the English speaking world with appearance of such studies as Raymond Williams’ *The Long Revolution* (1961) and is most often associated with Marxist approaches to cultural analysis”.

This definition clearly shows the role of the social context, creators and gatekeepers in the existence and success of literary works. The main idea underlying this view is that the literary work is conditioned and shaped by surrounding circumstances, social determinants and dominant socio-cultural values of the age.

The literary critics and sociologists agree that the sociological practice is very essential to interpret literary works, but they differ in their theories and methods. The literary critics look at texts, writers and readers and speculate about creation, reception and interpretation of literature. Social scientists, on the other hand, discuss books and literary institutions and dwell upon production, distribution and consumption of cultural products. The focus of social scientist is mainly on organizations and markets, centralized and decentralized publishing, laws and censorship norms, strategies of diffusion and reading habit of particular social groups. The literary socialists and historians are concerned with the relationship between individual authors and the circumstances of social and cultural era in which they live and write. In this context, M.H Abrams' view about the sociology of literature is very important. According to him,

“The term, ‘Sociology of literature,’ however, is applied only to the writings of those historians and critics whose primary, and sometimes exclusive, interest is in the ways that the constitution and form of literacy work are affected by such circumstances as its authors class status, gender, and political and other interests; the ways of thinking and feeling characteristic of its era; the economic conditions of the writers profession and of the publication and distributions of books ; and the social class, conceptions and values of the audience to which an author addresses the literary product or to which it is made available.”(2006:288)

The main idea underlying this view is that the literary work is conditioned and shaped by surrounding, circumstances and dominant cultural values of the age, the ideology of the publishers, critics and readers and the personality traits of the writer.

There are several approaches to sociology of literature. The most common approach to the relation of literature and society is the study of literary works as social documents, as assumed picture of social reality. This mirror image approach has a long and distinguished history, but it ignores the writer and the several social aspects which determine the existence of literary works. The Marxist approach that began with the rise of industrialism and capitalism viewed literature as the reflection of ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’. But like traditional approach, the Marxists also ignored the reading public, publishers, distributors, critics, patrons and other social determinants of literary works. It is in the works of modern sociologists of literature that we get the focus on the author, gatekeepers and the several social institutions which determine the existence and success of literary works. In their *Theory of Literature* (1963) Rene Welek and Austin Warren also focused the sociology of the writer and social determinants of literature. According to Terry Eagleton, “there are two main ways of in which an interest in the sociology of literature can be justified. The first form of justification is realist: literature is in fact deeply conditioned by its social context and any critical account of it, which omits this fact, is therefore automatically deficient. The second way is pragmatist: literature is in fact shaped by all kinds of factors and readable in all sorts of contexts, but highlighting its social determinants is useful and desirable from a particular standpoint” (1988:469). The sociology of literature, thus, combines both the ways and studies literature in its totality.

In short, sociology of literature is not only concerned with the mirror image or a social document but also with the social, political and economic organizations and forces of its age, the attitude, awareness and intention of the writer, the system of patronage and rewards, the role of critics in the success of literary creation, the ideology of the publishers and distributors, the interests and habits of the reading publics, the specific historical moment, the cultural heritage and the influence of the several social factors on the literary works. It tries to seek the answers of the several questions such as, how the specific literary form comes into being. How does it reach to the readers? How it is published? Who is the patron of the author? How do societal and cultural factors affect writers and his works? What personal forces propel individual to write? What are the reactions of the readers to the literary works? Why is it accepted or rejected by the readers and critics? How certain literary waves exist in a particular period? How literary taste develops? What is the role of distributors, and circulating libraries in the popularity of literary works? As the major critical theories that are commonly used to analyze, classify, interpret and evaluate literary works have not touched these questions, the new generation of thinkers and social critics such as Lucien Goldman, Leo Lowenthal, Robert Escarpit, M. C. Albrecht, Terry Eagleton, Alan Swingwood, John Hall, Diana Lawrenson, Anthony Giddens and others made a successful attempt to develop new theoretical perspectives and methods which later on came to be known as the 'the approaches and methods of sociology of literature'. Keeping in mind these ideas about the sociology of literature I have tried to explain the sociology of George Orwell's *Down and out in Paris and London*.

3. Sociology of Down and Out in Paris and London:

George Orwell's career as a writer began with the publication of his first full-length non-fictional work *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933). This work created confidence in George Orwell that he can become a writer. After completing his studies at Eton, Orwell joined the Indian Imperial Police in Burma. His five years there led him to reject every aspect of imperialism and brutality. He, then, resigned his job and moved to Paris to try his hand at short stories, but he ended up his career as a story writer by destroying them because nobody would publish them. He, then, started to write reviews and articles to the periodicals and journals. His most important activity of this time was writing novels. A proponent for socialism, Orwell wanted to write for the common man and purposefully lived as a tramp in London and the Home Countries and stayed with the miners in the north. There were several opinions about the fact and fiction on the picture depicted in *Down and Out in Paris and London*. Orwell himself cleared the doubts in the "Introduction" to the 1935 French edition by saying, "I think I can say that I have exaggerated nothing except in so far as all writers exaggerate by selecting. I did not feel that I had to describe events in the exact order in which they happened, but everything I have described did take place at one time or another..." In his essay "Why I Write" Orwell writes the motive of the writer. According to him "his subject matter will be determined by the age he lives in" (1968:03). He learned of the disparity between the classes and came to know a life of poverty and hardship amongst beggars and thieves. His study of the under-classes in general provided the themes for his first work *Down and out in Paris and London*.

3.1. Orwell's tramping experience in Paris and London as the major determinant of Down and Out in Paris and London:

Down and Out in Paris and London is an autobiographical account in two parts on the theme of poverty, hardship and humiliation. After resigning his post as a policeman in Burma, Orwell undertook investigative tramping expeditions in and around London, collecting material for writing articles and stories. In spring of 1928, he moved to Paris, where the comparatively low cost of living and bohemian lifestyle attracted many aspiring writers. He lived nearly eighteen months in cheap boarding house in Paris. His main intention of living there was to devote himself for writing.

The first part of his *Down and Out in Paris and London* gives the detailed account of his experience in Paris. The book begins with a description of the hotel and neighborhood where Orwell is lodging. The overall impression is of filth and hunger and a quietly endured, never-ending desperation for Paris's poor. Orwell was then living in Paris to get inspiration to become a writer. In order to maintain his daily expenditure and to pay his bills he started teaching English, but he could not succeed in it. Firstly, his students left him without paying and then he got robbed, leaving him enough money to survive for only a week or two. He made drastic changes in his budget and found that living in poverty was a complicated ordeal. He found himself without a job and low on funds. Due to the problem of unemployment, work in Paris was scarce, particularly for a foreigner. So Orwell began to economize by cutting out essentials like wine and cigarettes and then, inevitably, food. His good clothes were soon pawned, but the money he got was not enough to buy bread and butter. Desperately searching for any kind of work, he met his old friend, Boris, an enormously fat Russian who at one point was a waiter. Boris, however, was also out of work, practically starving, and almost dying of illness and hunger when Orwell met him. Boris insisted to search work. Both started to wander on the roads of Paris in search of job. A dozen weeks later, the two finally got jobs at a hotel—Boris as a waiter, and Orwell as a dishwasher. The work of a dishwasher was physically and spiritually exhausting. Orwell had to work fourteen hours a day in the basement of the kitchen. As the work in the hotel was very humiliating, they quit the job and joined another hotel. The new kitchen was even more cramped and, the working conditions of the hotel were very boring and y filthy. He had to work eighteen to twenty hours a day to keep up and got less money for it. Demoralized, Orwell decided to return to London.

When Orwell returned to London, he became a roaming poor. In fact he had not decided to do so but unfortunately he had to accept the same. Before he finalized his plans to return, he had been offered employment in a wealthy family. But the family, much to Orwell's misfortune, went on vacation just before he arrived, leaving him out of work and money for at least a month. He borrowed a few pounds and, as he did in Paris, pawned his best suit. Not used to leaving on the cheap in London, he spent his money too quickly by renting beds at overpriced inns. Very quickly, then, he had to join the other homeless in London, wandering between a series of shelters. Though the shelters were free, no one could stay more than one night, and the food served there was meager, just barely fit for human consumption. While Orwell was on the road between shelters, hunger and filth were his constant companions. These companions changed Orwell's attitude towards life and society which later made him the world famous novelist and journalist.

In *Down and Out in Paris and London*, Orwell follows a penniless British writer through two great European cities as he worked seventeen-hour workdays in the squalid kitchens of trendy Parisian restaurants. After working himself ragged and never getting ahead, he tried his luck in London where he lived the life of a vagrant, sleeping in lodging houses and taking charity tea at the Salvation Army. Through these scenes, Orwell explored one of the classic themes in most of his writing that of man vs. society. His tramping experience made him conscious about the society of the day. In it he has described the reality of dishwashers in the hotels and homeless beggars in London. His experience as a dishwasher and a homeless tramp provides the realistic picture of the society of the day and this reality of poverty is the base of *Down and Out in Paris and London*. In fact Orwell's career as a writer was really developed by this first non-fictional work.

3.2. The Role of gatekeepers in the existence and success of the *Down and Out in Paris and London*:

It is true that Orwell's experience in Paris and London is the base of his first non-fictional work. However, this is not the only determinant of his successful literary career. The gatekeepers comprising the publishers, critics, patrons and readers play important roles in making Orwell as the world famous writer. Let us see the role of these gatekeepers in the creation and success of *Down and Out in Paris and London*.

3.2.1. The Role of Publishers:

The sociology of literature studies the role of publishers, critics, patrons and readers in the existence of a literary work. When Orwell returned to England from Paris by the end of 1929 he went tramping for the next three months and wrote and rewrote the first version on his experience in Paris and London. He titled this version as "Days in London and Paris" and sent it to Jonathon Cape, the U. K. publishing firm. However it was rejected by Cape. Orwell, then, reworked and expanded the version but it was again rejected. A year later he offered a fatter typescript, added his London experience, changed its title as 'A Scullion Diary' and sent it to Faber & Faber where T.S. Eliot, then, was an editorial director. But Faber & Faber also rejected it on the ground of libel action. According to John Nichol "when George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* was rejected, he felt restless and dejected and attempted of getting himself arrested" (2009:06). At this point his friend, Mabel Fierz, in whose home Orwell discarded the typescript, took it to a literary agent, Leonard Moore who recognized it as a 'natural' for the new house of Gollancz. Victor Gollancz who had recently started his publishing firm agreed to publish the work subject to the removal of bad language and some identifiable names. Gollancz offered an advance of £40. He also changed the title as, *Confessions of Down and Out in Paris and London*. Orwell was not happy with this title. Gollancz, then, suggested another title as *The Confessions of a Dishwasher*. Instead of *dishwasher* Orwell preferred "*Down and Out*". At the last minute Gollancz shortened the title to *Down and Out in Paris and London*. The modifications are made to avoid possible libel action. But Orwell feared that the book might upset his family. So he decided to publish it pseudonymously. He, after possibilities including 'X', P.S.Burton, Kenneth Miles, and H. Lewis Always had been considered, was renamed "George Orwell". Orwell did not wish to publish under his own name Eric Blair, and Orwell was the name he used from then on for his main works—although many periodical articles

were still published under the name Eric Blair. *Down and Out in Paris and London* was published on 9 January 1933 and received favourable reviews. It was subsequently published by Harper & Brothers in New York. Sales however were low until 1940 when Penguin Books printed 55,000 copies for sale at sixpence. A French translation which Orwell admired by R.N Raimbault and Gwen Gilbert, entitled *La ache Enragée*, was published by Gallimard, 8 May 1935, with an exclusive introduction by Orwell.

3.2.2. The Role of Critics and Readers:

After the publications of the book, it received the both positive and negative reactions. Within a month of publication, a restaurateur and hotelier of forty years had written to *The Times* complaining that the book was unfairly disapproving to the restaurant trade. The *Times Literary Supplement* had previously reviewed *Down and Out in Paris and London*, calling it "a vivid picture of an apparently mad world". Orwell responded to the restaurateur's criticism; "I do know that in our hotel there were places which no customer could possibly have been allowed to see with any hope of retaining his custom." In *Adelphi*, C Day Lewis wrote; "Orwell's book is a tour of the underworld, conducted without hysteria or prejudice ... a model of clarity and good sense." J. B. Priestley, writing in the *Evening Standard*, considered it, "Uncommonly good reading, an excellent book and a valuable social document. The best book of its kind I have read in a long time." Compton Mackenzie wrote of Orwell's, 'immensely interesting book' and called it: "a genuine human document, which at the same time is written with so much artistic force that, in spite of the squalor and degradation thus unfolded, the result is curiously beautiful with the beauty of an accomplished etching on copper. The account of a casual ward in this country horrifies like some scene of inexplicable misery in Dante." Following the American publication, James T. Farrell, writing in *The New Republic*, called it "genuine, unexaggerated and intelligent". In an essay *The World of George Orwell*, Richard May ne considered the book as typical of something that was true of a great deal of Orwell's later writing; his - "relish at revealing behind-the-scenes squalor. He was always taking the lid off things - poverty, parlour Socialism, life in a coal mine, prep-school tyranny, the Empire, the Spanish Civil War, the Russian Revolution, the political misuse of language. According to Anupam Chakrabarti, "in his capacity as a plongeur or dishwasher Orwell was able to paint a picture of boredom, dirt, tyrannical oppression and suffering. The way the rich customers treated the dishwashers and waiters was a measure of the socio-economic exploitation of the poor" (1991:127). In short, the mixed reactions of the critics and readers about *Down and Out in Paris and London* show that the book is a milestone not only in the life of George Orwell but also in the history of Orwellian socialism.

4. Conclusion:

It is true that Orwell's experience in London and Paris is the major force of the existence of this work, but he really gets name and fame due to the publishers, critics and readers. So publishers and other gatekeepers are equally important in the creation and success of *Down and Out in Paris and London*. Here I would like to conclude that sociology of George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* clearly shows that the role of publisher, critics and readers is as important as the experience and

personality traits of George Orwell and the social conditions and situations of the day in the creation and success of *Down and Out in Paris and London*.

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