

Shifting Women from Periphery to the Centre: A Feminist Study of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*

Shweta Saxena

In an age of postmodern multiplicity and heterogeneity 'identity' has lost its *terra firma* and entered the complex yet enjoyable terrain of fluidity. Identity is defined not in fixed terms but in relation to other objects of proximity. The identity of women, however, has always been related to that of men. St Thomas defines woman as "imperfect man" and Aristotle characterises them by a certain "lack of qualities" vis-à-vis man. Further, Bible assigns a secondary, subsidiary position to Eve—created out of Adam's rib. Even the ancient Indian scripture *Manusmriti* proclaims women as physically, intellectually and morally inferior to men. Hence, conventionally women are always defined in relation to men, ". . . she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential" (Beauvoir xvi). Women have always acquired peripheral space at the circle of domesticity where men are poised at the centre. Keeping these notions in mind, the present paper attempts to study the portrayal of women in Charles Dickens's novel *Great Expectations*.

Charles Dickens, the peerless painter of child life with élan and the great chronicler of his time is also known for creating a variety of characters that have left an imperishable mark on the minds of the readers. Dickens's *Great Expectations* is one of the most remarkable novels about the growth of a child and his great future prospects. The protagonist of the novel is a small child Pip, who learns the hard lessons of life in the pursuit of his great expectations and his whole personality is transformed after going through the ordeal of time. Dickens's mastery in creating life like characters is evidenced in the characterisation of Pip, whose follies and foibles do not blemish his inherent goodness of heart but rather make him true to life. The novel contains many female characters also, namely, Miss Havisham, Estella, Bidley and Mrs Joe Gargery. It would be interesting to see whether Dickens is equally dexterous in portraying female characters as he is in portraying his male ones. The charge of misogyny that is often labelled against him holds some water or not. These and many related issues are endeavoured to be examined in the present paper.

Writing about Dickens's unpopularity among female readers George Gissing writes that for women Dickens is simply "vulgar" (43). They cannot enjoy his works as they do that of his forerunners, for he does not touch deeper aspects of heart. As for his female characters are concerned, Gissing remarks:

If George Eliot was of opinion that Shakespeare shows himself unjust to women, and on that account could not wholly revere him, we need not be surprised that average members of her sex should see in Dickens something like a personal enemy, a confirmed libeller of all who speak the feminine tongue. (43)

Michael Slater also finds in his critical analysis of the female characters in Dickens's early fiction that Dickens

sees women only as they have been typecast by men—as angelic ministers of grace and inspiration . . . as tormenting charmers . . . as threatners of male liberty . . . as trying partners . . . as gloriously absurd in their

distinct femaleness . . . or as singularly capable of dog-like devotion to men as they love even when they meet with nothing but cruelty and brutality in return. (240)

Whether the same is applicable in case of the female characters of *Great Expectations* will come to the fore in the following analysis. The first female character of some significance in the novel is that of Mrs Joe Gargery, Pip's elder sister and wife of blacksmith Joe Gargery. Mrs Gargery is twenty years older to Pip and has earned quite a "reputation with herself and the neighbours because she had brought me (Pip) up 'by hand.'" (Dickens 11). Incidentally, it is not just Pip who is brought up 'by hand' but also her husband Joe Gargery, as both of them receive recurrent thrashing of her hard and heavy hand. Mrs Gargery regards Pip not just as a "burden" but as a "delinquent, to be treated as such" (Barnard 1). Pip's description of the physical features of his sister is quite interesting. According to him she was not a good-looking woman and that "she must have made Joe Gargery marry her by hand" (Dickens 11). About her manners Pip opines that "she never was polite, unless there was company" (Dickens 21). Mrs Joe Gargery has many singularities and idiosyncrasies about herself. The most conspicuous is her whim for cleaning the house which in Pip's opinion is "an exquisite art of making her cleanliness more uncomfortable and unacceptable than dirt itself" (Dickens 37). Mrs Joe Gargery, though, does nowhere show her love and affection for her husband, she is full of jealousy when she comes to know that Miss Havisham wishes to see her husband Joe Gargery to discuss some serious matter related with Pip. If jealousy is a sign of love, Mrs Joe Gargery does really love her husband as is evidenced in her extreme anger on this occasion:

When I got home at night, and delivered this message for Joe, my sister 'went on the Rampage,' in a more alarming degree than at any previous period. . . . she threw a candlestick at Joe, burst into a loud sobbing, got out the dustpan . . . and began cleaning up to a terrible extent. Not satisfied with a dry cleaning, she took to a pail and scrubbing-brush, and cleaned us out of house and home, so that we stood shivering in the back-yard. (Dickens 173)

Mrs. Joe Gargery , however, is held in high esteem in the eyes of her husband who married her on account of her good reputation of bringing up her orphaned brother as her own child. Joe professes his feelings for Mrs. Joe Gargery before Pip in a very matter of fact manner: "Whatever family opinions, or whatever the world's opinions, on that subject may be, Pip, your sister is . . . a - fine - figure - of - a - woman!" (Dickens 82)

Biddy is another female character in the novel that plays an instrumental role in the growth of the protagonist Pip. She is introduced by the narrator Pip as the grand-daughter of Mr Wopsle's great-aunt. She was also an orphan like Pip and was also brought up "by hand."

The most striking feature of Biddy's personality, according to Pip, was her unkemptness; "for, her hair always wanted brushing, her hands always wanted washing, and her shoes always wanted mending and pulling up at heel." (Dickens 76) Biddy is not only a very good friend of Pip but also his first teacher; indeed, the "real teacher" in Mr Wopsle's great aunt's school (Byrd 261). She imparts all

her learning to him when after being insulted at the hands of Estella Pip was burning with an intense desire to make himself better. Biddy, in fact, is a true friend and close confidant of Pip, who does not hesitate in reproaching him when he develops snobbery for being a polished gentleman of London and feels ashamed of his rustic relatives Mr and Mrs Joe Gargery. In her growing years, Pip noticed a remarkable change in her personality: "Her shoes came up at the heel, her hair grew bright and neat, her hands were always clean. She was not beautiful - she was common, and could not be like Estella - but she was pleasant and wholesome and sweet-tempered" (Dickens 222). Pip, nevertheless, could not help comparing Biddy all the time with Estella, who was an epitome of beauty in his eyes and with whom he was passionately in love, even after receiving insults and disregard from her side.

As for Biddy, with each passing day Pip saw a better side of her. When his sister's health failed and she was almost bed-ridden, Biddy came to take care of her and of the whole household. Very soon Biddy put everything in place and became an indispensable part of the family. Pip reflects upon Biddy's versatile personality in the following words:

I began to think her rather an extraordinary girl. For, I called to mind now, that she was equally accomplished in the terms of our trade, and the names of our different sorts of work, and our various tools. In short, whatever I knew, Biddy knew. Theoretically, she was already as good a blacksmith as I, or better. (Dickens 223-24)

On many occasions, Pip also reflected upon the prospects of choosing Biddy as his companion for life, for unlike Estella, Biddy "would have derived only pain, and no pleasure, from giving me pain; she would far rather have wounded her own breast than mine. How could it be, then, that I did not like her much the better of the two?" (Dickens 232). Pip, however, could not love anyone but Estella and Biddy knew it better than he himself. Martin Fashbaugh states that Estella's marriage with Drummle probably engendered competitive spirit in Pip: "The resentment and jealousy generated from a heightened awareness of Estella's inaccessibility makes her more desirable and more likely to make Pip's estimation of her importance objectively inaccurate" (2). Biddy, on her part, always loved Pip but never desired her feelings to be reciprocated by him. After the death of Mrs. Joe Gargery she marries Joe, who is also a man of golden heart like herself and an abiding well-wisher of Pip. Both Biddy and Joe have unflinching affection for Pip which is exhibited in their christening their child after him. Indeed, in the entire gallery of female characters in the novel, Biddy's character stands out as the brightest and the noblest. There is a gradual evolution in her personality from a rough, rugged and messy school girl to a sensible, self-sacrificing and affectionate woman.

If on one hand Dickens shows utmost goodness of heart in the character of Biddy, on the other he exemplifies heartless cruelty in the character of Miss Havisham. She is introduced in the novel "as an immensely rich and grim lady who lived in a large and dismal house barricaded against robbers, and who led a life of seclusion." (Dickens 89). In his first encounter with her Pip describes her as the "strangest lady I have ever seen, or shall ever see" (Dickens 99). Paul Davis describes her as "the bizarre recluse who lives in a ruined mansion dressed in the tattered bridal gown that she has worn since she was left standing at the

altar many years before" (134). Her dainty bridal gown had lost its lustre with time so also her own countenance. She commands Pip to play the game of cards with Estella, her adopted child whom she employs as an instrument to break the hearts of the men for being faithless. The cause of her misery lies in her being betrayed by her lover Compeyson on her wedding day. The man duped her with false promises of love, took precious gifts from her, promised to marry her but on the appointed day did not turn up and thus left her sulking her broken heart in life to come. From that day onwards Miss Havisham lived a secluded life in her huge mansion and put balm to her bruised heart by torturing men through her veritable weapon of destruction—Estella. Pip also becomes a victim of the wrath of Miss Havisham, though initially he thinks that she is his beneficiary and his anonymous patroness who is funding his education in London so that she can marry Estella with him. But as the reality dawns over him, he strongly reproaches Miss Havisham for keeping him in the dark and playing with his emotions. Miss Havisham tells Pip about her past and tells him "what real love is. It is blind devotion, unquestioning self-humiliation, utter submission, trust and belief against yourself and against the whole world, giving up your whole heart and soul to the smiter - as I did!" (Dickens 425-26). When Pip expresses his intense love for Estella in front of Miss Havisham, she expresses her deep remorse by reiterating "What have I done! What have I done!" (Dickens 709). She confesses before Pip that when Estella came to her as a child she wanted to save her from misery, nothing else. But then,

. . . as she grew, and promised to be very beautiful, I gradually did worse, and with my praises, and with my jewels, and with my teachings, and with this figure of myself always before her a warning to back and point my lessons, I stole her heart away and put ice in its place. (Dickens 711)

Thus this jaded woman redeems her sins to a certain extent by realising her wrong-doings, but by that time it was too late. Estella does really become a hard-hearted woman who cannot feel any love or affection even for her true lover Pip and makes her life worse than hell by marrying a heartless brute Bentley Drummle.

By now it is evident that Estella is the lady love in Pip's life. But throughout the novel this remains to be a one-sided affair, as Estella could never reciprocate the feeling of Pip. She insulted him in their very first meeting by calling him a "common labouring boy" (Dickens 104). Later on, when in their grown up years Pip confesses his love for Estella, she bluntly replies him,

It seems . . . that there are sentiments, fancies - I don't know how to call them - which I am not able to comprehend. When you say you love me, I know what you mean, as a form of words; but nothing more. You address nothing in my breast, you touch nothing there. I don't care for what you say at all. (Dickens 643)

This hard heartedness of Estella does not only becomes a cause of Pip's distress, but also her own. Her decision to marry a ruthless brute Bentley Drummle proves to be the biggest misfortune of her life. The only reason possible for this misalliance seems to be Estella's attraction to "physical violence" (Capuano 201). Her husband was "quite renowned as a compound of pride, avarice, brutality, and meanness" and treated her with "great

cruelty.” (Dickens 861) Estella got separated from her husband, who later died in an accident. Throughout the novel she “is cynically following out Miss Havisham's plans for her to collect and betray numerous admirers,” yet she “struggles hard to preserve a feeling for Pip that will distinguish him and preserve him from that fate” (Gribble 134-35). The bitter experiences of life chastise the soul and psyche of Estella, and like Pip she also becomes wiser and nobler towards the end of the novel. She also understands Pip’s feelings and offers her everlasting friendship to him:

But you said to me . . . God bless you, God forgive you! And if you could say that to me then, you will not hesitate to say that to me now - now, when suffering has been stronger than all other teaching, and has taught me to understand what your heart used to be. I have been bent and broken, but - I hope - into a better shape. Be as considerate and good to me as you were, and tell me we are friends. (Dickens 865)

Estella’s transformation from a rude, haughty, and cold-blooded girl to a sombre, sensible and worldly-wise lady is no less amusing than that of the protagonist Pip.

The four female characters in the novel have been designed and developed more or less in a set pattern. All of them pass through the stage of transformation and turn out to be better individuals than before. Another remarkable similarity among them all (except Bidley) is that initially all of them have been depicted as inconsiderate and rude women who make the life of people around them a veritable hell.

The portrayal of women in *Great Expectations* due to their falling into a fixed category seems akin to stereotype of either divinely good or diabolically bad creatures. The women in the novel take their position as the evil agencies of inflicting torture over men. They try to control the destiny of other people around them. Whether it is the dominating figure of Mrs Joe Gargery, who considers herself Pip’s surrogate mother and thus the soul arbitrator of his well-being or the heartbroken misandrist Miss Havisham, who “uses Estella as a method of revenge on men” (Nonomura 7). The four women in Pip’s life dictate terms for him and chalk out the course of his destiny. His sister Mrs Gargery decides to send him to Miss Havisham without ever trying to know what torture he would receive at her hands. Miss Havisham identifies him as her obvious target of revenge on men. Pip instantly catches Miss Havisham’s bait and falls in love with Estella head over heels; but in return to his amorous advances gets only hatred and reproach. Estella’s insulting and contemptuous behaviour, nevertheless, rouses in Pip “a desire for wealth and gentility” (Nonoruma 4). In moments of acute despair and desperation it is the self-effacing friendship of Bidley that comes to Pip’s succour.

Pip, undoubtedly, is at the centre of the novel and all the female characters get their share of significance in relation to him only. Yet, the way they control his destiny instead of being controlled by him, these four women are in an authoritative central position not in the conventionally subdued peripheral state. And for this credit should be given to Dickens. As the female characters in the novel redeem themselves of their sins towards the end, their creator also, by way

of assigning some power to them, redeems himself to a certain extent of the charges of misogyny that are so often labelled against him.

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Dr. Shweta Saxena, Ph.D
Assistant Professor of English
Amity Institute of English Studies and Research
Amity University, Noida
Uttar Pradesh, INDIA