

“THE CIVILISED ENGLISHMEN”: CRITICISM OF THE CONCEPT OF CIVILIZED AND DEVELOPED IN *YEAST, NORTH AND SOUTH AND SYBIL*

Dr. SWAGATA CHOWDHURY

*Assistant Professor, Department of English
School of Engineering and Technology
Dhanalakshmi Srinivasan University
Samayapuram, Tiruchirappalli*

Abstract

This paper reads the novels namely Sybil, Yeast and North and South which were set in the Victorian period that is regarded as one of the most glorious periods of England's history. England had immense imperial wealth and a flourished industrialization which made it a powerful nation then. But there was a dark chapter in that history too. 1840s is known as the hungry forties. There were issues of poverty, malnutrition and unemployment. The authors of these novels criticized the societal hierarchy and the social injustices. In their criticism they questioned the concept of development, civilization and the so called civilized in Victorian England. The paper has used ecofeminist Vandana Shiva's criticism of the concept of development and civilization in her book Staying Alive as a critical tool.

Keywords: *hierarchy, capitalist, consumerism, development, civilized.*

Introduction

The reign of Queen Victoria is known for England's immense flourishing in wealth and power across the world through industrialism and imperialism. But this period also witnessed poverty, malnutrition and degeneration of the lives of the common English mass especially the 1840s. So the period is also known as hungry forties. Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil* (1845), Charles Kingsley's *Yeast* (1848), Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1855) were set in the period 1840s. These three novels vehemently criticized the depleted condition of the poor people of England. They questioned what can be seen as developed and civilized in this era though the statistical data and major narratives of this period showed developed, civilized Victorian England.

Theoretical Framework

Ecofeminist Vandana Shiva in her book *Staying Alive* questioned the concept of developed and civilized. According to her, it is the Western, patriarchal binary system of thinking that has set certain parameters to define development and civilized. The western dualist thought pattern always gives culture superiority over nature.

She argued that when “commodity production as the prime economic activity is introduced as development” (*Staying 7*) it is not development it is mal development. It is because such process of developing disrupts the potentialities of nature that is essential to get the basic sustenance of human living. It is only Western capitalist system that encourages materialistic improvement and consumerism as definition of development even though people are not getting basic sustenance of living. Shiva discussed a book entitled *Poverty: the Wealth of the People* where an African writer draws a distinction between poverty as subsistence, and misery as deprivation. It is useful to separate a cultural conception of subsistence living as poverty from the material experience of poverty that is a result of dispossession and deprivation. Culturally perceived poverty need not to be real material poverty: subsistence economies which satisfy basic needs through self-provisioning are not poor in the sense of being deprived. Yet the ideology of development declare them so because they do not participate overwhelmingly in the market economy, and do not consume commodities produced for and distributed through the market ... people are perceived as poor if they ... live in self- built housing made from natural material like bamboo and mud rather

than in cement houses. They are seen as poor if they wear handmade garments of natural fibre rather than synthetics (Shiva, *Staying* 10).

People are considered as developed and civilized when they consume commodities that are participating in the capitalist market economy. Shiva argued that "this cultural perception of prudent subsistence living as poverty has provided the legitimisation for the development process as a poverty removal project" (*Staying* 10) which according to her is a "culturally biased project" (*Staying* 10). In the Western dualist thought pattern people with such materialistic consumption are not only considered developed but also civilized. On the other hand, the lifestyle based on ecologically subsistence economy is considered not only poor but also not-civilized (sometimes barbaric) by the West. Val Plumwood in the *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* observed that the people in the West consider Western and materialistic or commercialized as central and civilized. On the other hand, they considered the non-Western and anything close to nature, as primitive, savage, and marginal. (42- 43).

Sybil

Benjamin Disraeli in *Sybil* criticized the hierarchical oppression of society. He thought that England became two nations: the rich and the poor. In the novel he portrayed characters like Walter Gerard, Charles Egremont and Stephen Morley. They were conscious, active characters who tried to think of the society.

One conversation between Walter Gerard and Charles Egremont will give light on Disraeli's thought regarding the development of England as a nation. Gerard did not believe the statistical data regarding the economic development of his country. He thought that the data was ironic because it did not reveal the miserable condition of the weaker section and the degeneration of society (*Sybil* 2: 76). Egremont said, "I was reading a work the other day," "that statistically proved that the general condition of the people was much better at this moment than it had been at any known period of history." Gerard replied, "Ah! yes, I know that style of speculation," he continued, your gentleman who reminds you that a working man now has a pair of cotton stockings, and that Harry the Eighth himself was not as well off. At any rate,

the condition of classes must be judged of by the age, and by their relation with each other. One need not dwell on that. I deny the premises. I deny that the condition of the main body is better now than at any other period of our history; that it is as good as it has been at several. I say, for instance, the people were better clothed, better lodged, and better fed just before the war of the Roses than they are at this moment. We know how an English peasant lived in those times; he eat flesh every day, he never drank water, was well housed, and clothed in stout woollens. Nor are the Chronicles necessary to tell us this. The acts of Parliament from the Plantagenets to the Tudors teach us alike the price of provisions and the rate of wages; and we see in a moment that the wages of those days brought as much sustenance and comfort as a reasonable man could desire (*Sybil* 2: 76-77).

Gerard's observation is the most crucial reflecting the pre-industrial era when common people got sufficient sustenance and comfort in their cottages with at least a happy domestic life. They did not get any chance to enjoy material luxuries like a "pair of cotton stockings" (*Sybil* 2: 76), but they earned sufficient wages that brought "as much sustenance and comfort as a reasonable man could desire" (*Sybil* 2: 77). So, they had lived a decent life even though they could not have any material luxury (*Sybil* 2: 76). Through the character of Gerard, Disraeli criticized the capitalist system that has created and encouraged commercial improvement and consumerism but has neglected and disrupted the life-enhancing forces of ecology.

Yeast

Yeast was written by Charles Kingsley. It was published in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1848. The novel reflects serious concerns regarding the rural pollution and the depleted condition of the common country people. The novel was set in a countryside in South England. Lancelot Smith, the main protagonist of the novel gradually came to know about the social, ecological and moral conditions of the rural poor. He saw how societal injustice and pollution degenerated the lives of the poor country people.

Tregarva was the most interesting person whom Lancelot met in the village. It was him who made Lancelot gradually aware of the real scenario of the English

countryside. Lancelot observed that the poor people did not get even the three basic needs of life - food, clothes, and proper shelter. They were exploited by the rich section. They worked as day labourers and struggled hard to survive the squalid misery. They failed to have a happy domestic life as all the members like the husband and wife and all their children were compelled to work. They chose drunkenness as a way to escape the pangs of poverty and hardships. They gradually became ignorant, idle and coarse in manner. Lancelot observed that they "sunk too low in body and mind" (*Yeast* Chap XIII).

When Lancelot came to know that the village people only chose alcohol as sole entertainment of their lives he asked his friend Tregarva "it does seem strange that no other amusement can be found for them than the beer-shop. Can't they read? Can't they practise light and interesting handicrafts at home, as the German peasantry do?" (*Yeast* Chap XIII). Tregarva in reply said

Who'll teach 'em, sir? From the plough-tail to the reaping-hook, and back again, is all they know. Besides, sir, they are not like us Cornish; they are a stupid pigheaded generation at the best, these south countrymen. They're grown-up babies who want the parson and the squire to be leading them, and preaching to them, and spurring them on, and coaxing them up, every moment. And as for scholarship, sir, a boy leaves school at nine or ten to follow the horses; and between that time and his wedding-day he forgets every word he ever learnt, and becomes, for the most part, as thorough a heathen savage at heart as those wild Indians in the Brazils used to be (*Yeast* Chap XIII).

Lancelot observed that it was ironic that those inactive poor villagers were thought to be "the civilised Englishmen" because they were people with coats and trousers. Lancelot found that on the other hand, the Indians were called savage as their clothes and living style were different from the so-called civilized West. He told Tregarva "And then we call them civilised Englishmen!" Lancelot continued, "We can see that your Indian is a savage, because he wears skins and feathers; but your Irish cottar or your English labourer, because he happens to wear a coat and trousers, is to be considered a civilised man" (*Yeast* Chap XIII). In this passage, Kingsley

vehemently criticized the established Western dualistic stereotypes that decide which is civilized and which is not (*Yeast* Chap XIII).

Vandana Shiva in *Staying Alive* found that the West considered commodity consumption as development and culture (10). On the other hand anything natural that do not pursue materialism is thought to be poor and uncivilized and uncultured. So a mud hut with a thatched roof and people using natural fibre for clothing is always portrayed by the West as primitive and savage as they do not use man-invented commodities (Shiva, *Staying* 10). So it is evident that Charles Kingsley questioned and subtly criticized the Western concept of civilized and developed in this novel *Yeast*.

North and South

In the novel *North and South*, Gaskell contrasted the environmental and ecological condition of the northern and southern parts of England. She portrayed her observant heroine Margaret Hale as a courageous and conscious woman. She came to Milton, the imaginative manufacturing town of north England from a southern countryside. She observed that in the south, country people were very poor; they had to struggle hard for their existence. But those poor people had their own identities and they successfully retained their natural connection with the ecosystem.

She observed that the poor working people of Milton did not have that chance of connection any more. They possessed few furniture and had food that the poor of Helstone never had the chance to enjoy. So the poor country people of South would have considered such furniture and food as luxury. But Milton working class was forced to live an unhealthy, risky life. Actually, the people of Helstone had a natural life in a healthy ecosystem. But the people in Milton had to follow the way set by the commercial world and live a commercialized way of life without the natural sustenance.

Vandana Shiva pointed out how in the age of Enlightenment and modern material progress living in a hut, thatched cottage without any materialistic luxury was considered poverty (*Staying* 10). Mr. Hale, father of Margaret Hale who was once a parish priest, had observed the contrast between the poor people of Milton and

Helstone (*North* 148-49). Poor people of the countryside with a close connection with nature had to work hard to get sustenance, but they did not have to face the life-destroying forces. The human intervention did not threaten their living conditions in the name of progress.

On the other hand, the lives of the city had more comfortable accessories of living like furniture, but they had to face life-destroying forces like pollution and diseases. The vile living conditions endangered their lives. They had to depend on the wages that they got in factories. If they lost their jobs by any chance, they had no other way than starving. But the villagers were deriving sustenance from nature. So, they were nature-dependent, and that strengthened their bond with nature. But factory wages in manufacturing towns made them dependent on human beings, thus subtly strengthening the domination and exploitation of the established societal and belief structure.”

Conclusion

It is evident from the above discussion that the novels namely *Sybil*, *Yeast*, *North and South* present a conscious criticism of the hierarchy and in the presentation there are both overt and covert criticism of the concept of development and civilized in the Victorian England. Charles Kingsley, Benjamin Disraeli and Elizabeth Gaskell questioned the parameters of development and civilized set by the Western hierarchy. They criticized the commercial culture that flourished in Victorian era with

massive industrialization and mechanization. The authors in these novels tried to portray that capitalism, mechanization created the culture of commodity which disrupted human beings' natural connection to ecology making life depleted and difficult for the common people.

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