

**SOCIAL EXPLOITATION OF WOMEN AND ILLEGITIMATE
CHILDREN: READING EDGAR'S
*The Life and Adventures of Mr. Nicholas Nickleby***

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ABSTRACT

*The present paper focuses on what are the inner aspects in the play *The Life and Adventures of Mr. Nicholas Nickleby*. Moreover, it talks about the author's intention of giving a social message of human relations in the capitalist society. Besides the paper depicts the real nature of capitalism and how it constructs barricades among the people. Apart from, David Edgar categorically explains about women's exploitation under the umbrella of capitalism. Here, the prime argument is illegitimate children and they are treated as bearing the sins of the parents who are responsible to bring them to this world. As these children are neglected, they are unable to come out of the poverty and either enter a life of crime or of wandering from one place to another. Finally, the condition of these parents has given the great advantage to the Yorkshire schools by offering an out-of-the-way location with "no-vacations" to humiliate the parents as they attempt to get on with their lives.*

Key words: *capitalism, poverty, social-realism, illegitimate, exploitation.*

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

David Edgar is a leading socio-political playwright, social critic and activist in Britain at present. All his plays express an idea that the theatre is a necessary public forum. He was born in a theatrical family in Birmingham. Edgar pursued his interest in theatre throughout his school and university career. While attending Oundle public school from 1961 to 1965, he acted, designed productions, and wrote several plays. In 1965-1966, he taught at Oundle; in 1966 he entered Manchester University and became a director. At Manchester Edgar acted, directed, and wrote plays and also he edited the student newspaper and chaired the Socialist Society. After graduation, Edgar worked as a political reporter for the Bradford Telegraph and Argus and wrote plays and theatre reviews in his spare time.

Edgar came to limelight with his outstanding play *Destiny* (1976), captured the attention of a public wider than the regional and fringe audiences in The Royal Shakespeare Company. The Play *Destiny* also got secured Whiting Award in 1976. Peter Billingham argues that Edgar's substantial body of plays and non-dramatic political journalism represents an important record of a period of major changes within British social, cultural and political life and he emphasizes that Edgar traverses the widest and longest period of creative activity. He also

remarks that *Destiny* is a major play for Edgar because it signals a crucial transitional stage in his early-to-mid career from his early agitprop work to the development of his later style. Moreover, Billingham says that it is recognizable by its strong sense of structural symmetry fused with an extensively informed political understanding (Billingham 41).

EDGAR AND EPIC THEATRE

In his plays, Edgar has been very curious to use a fine theatrical language because he believes that the socio-political issues can be effectively projected to the audience of the mainstream theatre. Some of his works have received a wide hearing as a result of its appearance before the public in various forms. Moreover, his ideas appear in several places for different audience occurs with his account of the splintered harmony between street theatre, social realism, and performance art towards the end of the seventies. The relationship between theatrical conventions, devices and the political content he carries will be crucial to this assessment. *Maydays* (1983) may be categorized as an example of social-realism because Edgar presents individual characters in relation to socio-historic force. He reveals that social-realism does not show people's individual behaviour as being somehow independent of the society in which they live. Apart from that, it exposes people's recognizable activities to the history. In *Maydays*, Edgar visualizes how the sense of English socialism is decayed and how the historical scope is widened to include the traumatic events in post-war Europe, specifically the Russian invasion of Hungary in 1956. The main argument in this play is how the historical experiences are perceived and how the present position of the nation can be understood. The understanding involves the popular perception of British history and its symbiotic relationship with 'national identity'.

Peter Billingham convincingly argues that *Maydays* is a hugely ambitious play in terms of its aims, themes and subsequent historical scale. He recollects the observation of John Bull that the play is a vast sweep through a post-war socialist history of Europe and also it is a variant epic in structure, one scene develops from another, as lights cross-fade, and trucks are moved in and out. The effect is to suggest a continuity of action that plays against the historical and geographical jumps by the narrative (Billingham 56).

***The Life and Adventures of Mr. Nicholas Nickleby* (1980): A SOCIOPOLITICAL PLAY**

The Life and Adventures of Mr. Nicholas Nickleby is one of the famous adaptations of David Edgar. It is written in two parts: Part One and Part Two. For the first time, the two parts were put together in front of the audience on 14th June 1980. It was one of the biggest successes in his theatrical career and also gave a big financial support to Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) in order to solve its debts. It was originally written by Charles Dickens in 1830 and the main objective of the novel is to explore the mindset of bourgeois and other sociological issues at that time. The novel particularly depicts the human relations and how people are gradually damaging the line of the humanity. It also shows how people give preference to currency rather than the fellow human beings. Moreover, it vividly conveys how poor women are exploited as sex objects in the capitalist society. It displays Dickens's social and political understanding and also portrays if men would behave decently the world would be decent.

Such a great novel is well crafted as a play by David Edgar. Susan Painter persuasively argues that Edgar offers an analysis of the leading problems of the day that is consistent with his practice as political commentator for the stage (Painter 52). It scrupulously seems that Edgar was happy to adopt the novel as he thought of those conflicts were in many ways comparable with the present issues. This is basically designed melodramatic style and decorated with all the colours and shades of dramatic genre. Peter Billingham argues that in this play Edgar has been offered a different sort of dramatic canvas on which to paint and also he says that Edgar's radical analysis exposes the social inequality and injustice done to the unprivileged. Nicholas's own witnessing and experiencing of his father's imprisonment as a debtor in the notorious Newgate Prison left an indelible mark upon his life (Billingham 55).

Nicholas is the protagonist of the play and Ralf, his uncle, is a villain. Nicholas' father is not successful in the business and commerce. The premature death of Nicholas' father puts the family in a dire financial struggle and also lost their house too. Nicholas has started his adventures as a bread giver to his mother and his sister, Kate. Though Ralf is rich, he never bothers about poor financial conditions of his own brother's family. On the contrary, he pretends as though he helps them to bring them out of the financial struggles. Therefore, Nicholas has joined as a tutor in Dotheboys Hall, a residential school in Yorkshire. When Nicholas sees the baleful condition of the school, he does not want to work over there. The principal, Mr. Squeers, is a wicked person who always shouts and beats the children. Edgar portrays social and economical conditions of the people. Because of stepfathers or stepmothers or financial troubles, some of the boys or girls are forcibly joined such pathetic schools. One of the boys in the school is Smike, whose physical and mental condition is not up to the mark. Moreover, nobody comes to see him after joining in the school. Because of aggressive nature of Mr. Squeers and militant nature of his family makes Smike helpless and schizophrenic personality. Meanwhile, Ralf Nickleby is exploiting Mrs. Nickleby and Kate for his business expansion. After acknowledging the vicious nature of his uncle, Nicholas has an argument with Ralf and takes his mother and sister from his clutches. Ralf is a tough man and he never shows sympathy on people who are in dire condition.

Similarly, Brecht designed the character of Mr. Peachum as a person who always dislikes underprivileged people in *The Threepenny Opera*. In the same way, Edgar also portrays the character of Mr. Ralf, who does not like poor people. On the contrary, through the characters of Cheerybles brothers, Edgar suggests how a capitalist should live in the society. They employ Nicholas in their firm in order to give a decent life of a disadvantaged family. Edgar persuasively argues that:

Nicholas has come to London as an innocent and is rudely thrown up against cynicism, brutality and sham. He discovers that goodness is not the function of status, indeed that more often than not human decency is to be found among the low-castes or outcasts, rather than in the halls of the great; and he and we discover this truth in the most theatrical manner, through the relationships that Nicholas forges, of antagonism or friendship, with moneylenders, rakes, schoolmasters, members of the parliament and misers (on the one hand), and bluff and simple corn-dealers, alcoholic clerks and mentally-retarded simpletons (on the other). For Nicholas, all that is solid has indeed melted into air, all that he thought of as holy has been profaned,

and, as Marx and Engels predicted, he is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind. (Edgar 154-55)

At the end of the play Ralf terribly suffers as he recollects the things he does against his niece. He does not digest the death of his son as he is the main reason for it. He feels deeply that he is not the man he thought himself to be. After discovering his inhuman nature, he kills himself at last. Like Brecht, David Edgar has given the importance to the theatre as a platform where the performers work in order to eradicate the social inequalities.

Janelle Reinelt and Gerald Hewitt says that Edgar has published articles on civil liberties, the Labour leadership contest, the BBC, coalition politics in Europe, a comparison of novel-writing and playwriting, censorship and the arts, new playwriting, and a review of studies of patriotism and Britishness (Reinelt and Hewitt 38).

CONCLUSION

This article has presented how Edgar deconstructed the established tradition in terms of English theatre in his writings. It also discussed the sociopolitical issues in the play *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*. In most liberal and first world nations, a child's legitimacy is no longer an issue of social condemnation. On the contrary, fundamentalist groups in second and third world nations continue to punish offenders and their offspring. The play touches the hearts of the readers to think living in the real world. Besides, it preaches the readers about the significance of human relations particularly in the contemporary times.

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