

**Theme of Social Injustice in Three
Different Cultures Of
The 19th Centuries and the 20th centuries**

By

Samah Muhammad

**Department of English,
Faculty Of Arts, Assiut University** □



Theme of Social Injustice in Three Different Cultures of the 19th and the 20th Centuries **Samah Muhammad**

Social injustice happens when unfair and unjust relations occur between the individual and the society, a society where social reputation, money, and political power are the whole thing. Social and economic injustice takes place when those in the high class have the upper hand on the economy of the society so that they prevent the lower ones from growing and flourishing. They intentionally keep them at a lower level because they know that their predominance lies in their subjugation. This leads to hatred and criminal atmosphere which gives birth to coercion, repression, and despair among those in the lower class. Social injustice is something happens every day, when Dickens once says in *Nicholas Nickleby*: "cases of injustice, and oppression, and tyranny, and the most extravagant bigotry, are in constant occurrence among us every day." (269)

The purpose of this comparative study is to focus on the harmony and the uniqueness of the compared works. Despite the difference in culture, tradition, time of authorship, and the change in human history, the themes of the compared works have the same sensibility, and they reflect similar consciousness of one very serious problem of human life. This makes comparisons open to all

Theme of Social Injustice in Three Different Cultures of the 19th and the 20th Centuries Samah Muhammad



branches of knowledge: history, philosophy, sociology, ethicsetc. It has been found that comparing texts of the same theme is more interesting and rewarding than the dry and undocumented tracing of the influence of one writer, or one literature, on another.

The theme of social injustice is compared in the following novels: Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, and Abd al-Rahman al-Sharkawi's *al-Ard (The Land)*. Victor Marie Hugo, Charles John Huffam Dickens, and Abd al-Rahman al-Sharqawi are pioneers of literary writings in their countries. Victor Marie Hugo is one of the greatest and best known French authors. Charles John Huffam Dickens is one of the most considerable English novelists of the Victorian era. Abd al-Rahman al-Sharqawi is one of the unique Egyptian novelists who is sometimes entitled the "Arabian Victor Hugo". The three authors have a strong concern with the social circumstances that the lower classes face. They all are convinced that revolutionary changes are inevitable but must come from the working class, and insist that justice is brought to every citizen and not only to the wealthy. They all believe in the freedom of speaking and they feel that people have

Theme of Social Injustice in Three Different Cultures of the 19th and the 20th Centuries **Samah Muhammad**



the right to express their opinion without any threats from any side, and that they have the free-will to act without any pressure.

Victor Marie Hugo (26 February 1802 – 22 May 1885) was a French novelist, poet, and dramatist of the Romantic Movement. Charles John Huffam Dickens (7 February 1812 – 9 June 1870) was a British novelist, journalist, editor, illustrator, and social critic of the Victorian era who created some of the world's best-known fictional characters. Abd al-Rahman al-Sharqawi (10 November 1920-24 November 1987) was an Egyptian novelist, poet, journalist, and playwright. Like Hugo, al-Sharqawi's literary fame comes not only from his poetry but also based on his novels and his dramatic achievements. The three authors believe in the importance of education, knowledge, and the power of word. Hugo says : "one can resist the invasion of an army but one cannot resist the invasion of ideas" ("Victor Hugo Quotes") and Charles Dickens writes in *The Complete Works of Charles Dickens: Oliver Twist*: "There are books of which the backs and covers are by far the best parts." (97). Abd

Theme of Social Injustice in Three Different Cultures of the 19th and the 20th Centuries Samah Muhammad



al-Rahman al-Sharqawi says in *Ali Imam al-Muttakeen* : "a word can shake the oppressor; the word is the fort of freedom."

The three authors are regarded as the literary influences of their age. Their works touch most of the political and social issues and the artistic trends of their time. Hugo's best-known works, outside France, are the novels *Les Misérables*, (1862) (translated as *The Miserable Ones, or Wretched Poor*), and *Notre-Dame de Paris*, (1831) (known in English as *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*). Among many volumes of poetry, *Les Contemplations* (*The Contemplations*) and *La Légende des siècles* (*The Legend of the Ages*) stand particularly high in critical esteem. He also produced a considerable number of drawings which come out as a casual hobby, which have been admired worldwide. Dickens' best known work of historical fiction is his 1859 novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, set in London and Paris. *Oliver Twist* (1837–39) and *Great Expectations* (1860 -1) are also frequently adapted, and, like many of his novels, evoke images of early Victorian London. Al-Sharqawi's best known novel is *al-Ard* which was written in 1953. Its subsequent English-language version would be titled *The Egyptian*

Earth which was translated by the British author and journalist Desmond Stewart, and made into a film by the famous Egyptian filmmaker Yusuf Shahin. *al-Ard*, which was serialized in an Egyptian magazine in 1953 and then was published as a book in 1954. Al-Sharqawi's second novel was *al-Shawari' al-khalfiyya* (*Back Streets*). He has written two verse plays, *Ma'sat Jamila* (*The Tragedy of Jamila*) about the Algerian national heroine Jamila Bouhaired, and *al-FataMahran*.

Hugo, Dickens, and al-Sharqawi unmistakably display the characters that are struggling for their survival and fighting against oppression and injustice through their novels. Every character, in the three novels, screams out loud against the inevitable oppression which is the result of the irregular and unjust economic system and the damaging 'cliché' of the high and the low, the rich and the poor. The authors present a detailed account of the societies and human behaviours to show the great desires towards power. They also condemn the unjust class-based structure of the nineteenth and twentieth century, showing that the society's structure turns good,



innocent people into beggars and criminals. They expose the abuses, evils, injustices, and greediness in their societies at their time.

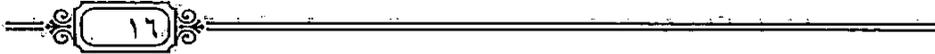
Three vivid exemplars from the three selected novels who suffered from social injustice and social inequality are seen in the characters of Jean Valjean, Abel Magwitch, and Abu Suwailim. After comparing them, the researcher found a lot of similarities between them. They are imprisoned, tortured, and treated unequally in the name of the law. Jean Valjean, the protagonist of *Les Miserables*, remains behind bars for 19 years because he steals one loaf of bread for the hungry kids of his widowed sister. Abel Magwitch, one of the most interesting characters that comes across in the plot of *Great Expectations*, is an escaped convict who spends most of his life tramping and begging. Abu Suwailim in *al-Ard* loses all of his land and crops for the sake of the road that is going to be built through his agricultural land to pave the way to the Basha's villa. He is also imprisoned because he has rejected the building of the road. The three of them are imprisoned for different reasons at different times.

In *les Miserables*, The character of Valjean reveals how the French criminal-justice system transforms a simple thief of a loaf of bread into a career criminal. It is the government who forces him to steal; however, it punishes him for nineteen years because of that! At that time, the kings and bourgeois treated the middle class society very badly or arbitrarily. This reaction led to the French Revolution in 1789. It is usual for the government at that time to catch the suspicious people, not guilty people. Being an ex-convict makes it hard for Valjean to find a descent-resting place or a job.

In *Great Expectations*, when the convict Magwitch first appears in the opening scene, he is described as "a man who had been soaked in water, and smothered in mud, and cut by flints, and stung by nettles, and torn by briars." (Dickens 3) This is what society has done to bring Magwitch to this condition. "When we hear his story later, we see how from his earliest childhood he is doomed to become a criminal by poverty, degradation, indifference, and inhumanity of those who wield authority." (Lall 46)

In *al-Ard*, Abu Suweilim has been imprisoned because he has always been fighting the corrupt regime and its foreign

Theme of Social Injustice in Three Different Cultures of the 19th and the 20th Centuries Samah Muhammad



supporters. He is never afraid of the Mayor and is always insulting him in front of the public by the adjective 'impure'. So, the Mayor includes Abu Suweilim's name among those who are going to be sent to prison in order to be punished. Abu Suweilim has been beaten, tortured, and treated worse than an animal. "If the Magistrate had beaten a cat or a dog as he had beaten Abu Suweilim, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals would have intervened." (Stewart 182)

The authors of the novel also use food, especially, bread to smite the society's conscience and highlight the injustice of the penal system of their countries during their time. Bread, of course, has a radical symbolism in the three novels. There was no sharper marker of economic status in the 19th and 20th century than bread. Martyris says in her article *Let Them Eat Bread* that:

the countries were divided into rich people who ate soft white bread and poor people who ate coarse black bread. Almost everyone in *Les Misérables* eats black bread. The loaf that Valjean steals, in the winter of 1796, is that oval loaf weighing four and a half pounds,

with a thick black crust and heavy grey meal inside.

Not the sort of thing you would want to eat nowadays.

Dickens is always alert to the significance of food and bread to emphasize social situations and the lives of individuals. At the early beginning of *Great expectations*, bread also has been seen as symbolic. Though Pip is hungry, he saves his bread for the convict. Pip is terrified of bringing the food, but his sympathy for Magwitch grows as he watches him eat, and the convict never forgets his actions, which changes the life of Pip thoroughly after that. In *al-Ard*, all the poor villagers eat that rough coarse black bread. This is clear in the conversation between Sheikh Hassouna and Diab, when Sheikh Hassouna talks about the Americans, he says that they burn the cotton, and they let their pigs eat the wheat. This makes Diab say: "if the wheat hadn't been burnt, we would have eaten wheat bread instead of eating that tough one which destroys our stomach." (al-Sharqawi 510)

The position of women during the Revolutionary time is very difficult. At that time, women had difficulty to get a job at any field, and those who have wealth suffer many other problems. The authors

Theme of Social Injustice in Three Different Cultures of the 19th and the 20th Centuries Samah Muhammad



shed light on various kinds of oppression the women had to face in their societies: alienation, inequity, physical, psychological and sexual violence, and even prostitution. Prostitution happened for those who were jobless and in need for money. However, some women preferred working as laborers or servants than working as prostitutes to uphold their dignity. In *Les Misérables*, Fantine, a struggling single mother, is forced into circumstances that parallel what countless women face today. She was unable to find work and falling behind on her debts to her child's caretakers. She is forced to sell all of her belongings, hair, teeth, and eventually her body, but she did not choose to enter into prostitution to survive.

In *Great expectations*, Miss Havisham and Estella Havisham are victims of the Victorian society despite their wealth and social status. Estella Havisham was an orphan at the age of three; she was raised by Miss Havisham, a wealthy woman who lives in Satis House. Miss Havisham's effect on Estella is mostly negative. Estella is a victim of Miss Havisham's behavior and teaching. She does not learn what love is or how to love another person. Rather, Miss Havisham raises her to be a heart-breaker who tortures men. She is

Theme of Social Injustice in Three Different Cultures of the 19th and the 20th Centuries Samah Muhammad

isolated from the society of normal adults and children. Miss Havisham herself is a victim because of her wealth. Her half-brother conspires with a conman named Compeyson to steal her fortune and then leaves her at the altar on her wedding day. She loses both of her fortune and her fiancé at the same time which makes her devastated. Another character in the novel is Mrs. Joe, a marginalized character, who is deeply affected by social injustice. Burke says in his description to Mrs. Joe: "Mrs. Joe's definitely vile, but she does have some legitimate reasons to be so. She has had a hard life – she lost both her parents at a young age. She has also had five brothers die. Her life has been filled with death and sadness. She also had to grow up very quickly when she started raising Pip in her early twenties, and she has the constant pressure to provide for him".

In *al-Ard*, Khadra is a vivid example of the social inequity of her society. She is a symbol of the impoverished women driven to despair and death by a cruel society, a society where the upper class exploits the innocence of the poor and abandons them quite easily. Perhaps worse than her "profession" as an inevitable whore is the fact that she has no land, no family, no one to protect her other than

Theme of Social Injustice in Three Different Cultures of the 19th and the 20th Centuries Samah Muhammad



her sarcastic tongue. She is a girl without relations, without honor, and with no moral. This happens as a result of the unjust society which leads her to prostitution for a living. Waseefa is another impoverished woman who suffered a lot from social inequity. She seeks any chance to get out and escape that miserable poor life of her village to travel to Cairo to live the life of those urban ladies there. It is she who is beaten by the Mayor's guard when she tries to defend herself against the Mayor's insult and tyranny. She weeps a lot when she knows that her father has been imprisoned for no guilt, and cries when she finds that they don't have enough corn for them to eat. She is the one who is obliged to work with those men who are destroying her father's fields!

The theme of childhood in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is a prominent one among many authors. Children in Revolutionary times were often disregarded and ignored by their parents. The authors of the novels publicize the hardships of the abandoned children, and orphans in their societies. The prevalence of orphans and unusual family structures in the novels is the most obvious indicator that societies and politics in the period of the

Theme of Social Injustice in Three Different Cultures of the 19th and the 20th Centuries Samah Muhammad

authorship of the novels have gone terribly wrong. The mass poverty of the majority of the population has serious consequences for many families, but the most affected are the children who had lost their parents too early. The children in the three novels are exposed to poverty, danger, exploitation, and violence. But they are fortunate enough to be rescued by relatives or other sympathetic persons who share some humane characteristics.

In *Les Misérables*, Cosette's father abandons both his child and lover, Fantine, when he hears that she has become pregnant. Cosette is a child stripped of humanity, and grows up in an atmosphere of poverty and fear. Although she is still a child, she has to work hard like an adult. She is tortured till her beautiful face changes; she becomes a bad-faced child at five! But later, she is rescued by Jean Valjean, who raises her as a father. Gavroche is the son who has been neglected by his parents (the Thénardiens). His parents tell him to live in the street since he would have a better life there. He is unnamed but chooses the name for himself.

Theme of Social Injustice in Three Different Cultures of the 19th and the 20th Centuries Samah Muhammad



In *Great expectations*, Pip is a victim of physical abuse that was a common phenomenon upon raising orphans during the Victorian age. He is a victim of many socio-economical elements. He is also a victim of the social class gap and the “ambitions” that the industrial revolution brought along to England. But later he is also rescued by his secret benefactor, Magwitch who considers Pip as a son to him. "Look'ee here, Pip. I'm your second father. You're my son — more to me nor any son. I've put away money, only for you to spend." (Dickens 453)

In *al-Ard*, the narrator of the novel is an example of the plight of children. He is not born as an orphan; however, he suffers a lot from social poverty prevailing in his country. He has very simple dreams but his family's social conditions prevent those dreams from being achieved. He dreams of little silver coins jingling in his pocket, of a monthly allowance instead of pocket money, of a watch on his wrist, and of a pair of long trousers! When he asked his father for a new suit: "he found such request difficult to grant. Like other fathers, he tried to keep his financial difficulties secret, to save his face in the eyes of the world. He never had much cash himself."(Stewart 33)

One central theme in the three novels is the extent of wealth and power among the upper and bourgeoisie class. The bourgeoisie and high class have all means to generate money. For bourgeoisie, money is a tool of power and authority to exploit the low worker. The low workers heavily suffer from limited job opportunities, high food prices, and high taxes. They have to sell their skill to earn money to fulfill their needs. While the high class society uses its power to oppress the weak, the lower class couldn't help facing such power as they lack legal protection.

This was clear in *Les Misérables* in the characters of the Thénardiens who are being satirized by Hugo as belonging to "the indeterminate layer of society sandwiched between the middle and the lower classes which combines the worst qualities of both, having neither the generosity of the worker nor the respectable honesty of the bourgeois." (Hugo 150) Another example of power and authority is personified in the character of Javert whose misguided and self-destructive pursuit of justice is more tragic than villainous. The social justice system in France is also illustrated in

Theme of Social Injustice in Three Different Cultures of the 19th and the 20th Centuries Samah Muhammad



various courts, juries, and policemen who appear throughout the novel.

In *Great Expectations*, Mr. Jaggers, Bentley Drummle, and Miss Havisham belong to the bourgeoisie class in society. Mr Jaggers is a wealthy, powerful lawyer who works in the society but tries to keep himself clean from it. He uses his power to get criminals off. He always smells like soap, and he washes his hands constantly, as if he's trying to wash away the grime, the corruption, and the horrors of those he works with everyday. Likewise, Miss Havisham's wealth brings her no comfort at all but she uses it as a tool to upset her grasping relatives and to get her revenge on the male sex. Bentley Drummle, in like manner, has wealth but is a brutal and ignorant bully whose aristocratic background gives him the freedom to behave in this way.

In *al-Ard* we have the rich and conniving Mahmoud Bey who belongs to the bourgeoisie class. He is a selfish man with power whose predominant concerns are for his personal comfort and well-being without paying any interest to those of the community.

Theme of Social Injustice in Three Different Cultures of the 19th and the 20th Centuries **Samah Muhammad**

The Umda (the village's Mayor) is nothing more than an extensive symbol of the power of the police. His only aim is to please those in the authority without paying any attention to the villagers. He is a tool at the hands of the authority to beat and suppress those villagers who refuse to obey the unjust law that has been forced upon them. Sheikh Yusuf is another character that shows the subjection of the Bourgeois. He does not complete his education in Al-Azhar, so he opens a shop in the village which is the only one there. He exploits the need of people and turns to a bourgeois who does not care for the poor life conditions of his village, but he strives to take the mayor's position to suppress the villagers. He is not reluctant to sell to the farm workers who will grab the land from the poor villagers. Shaykh al-Shennawi is the village mufti, the preacher at the mosque, the teacher of the children, and the adviser of the old. He is not a man of a great wealth, but he is the one who uses his power as a clergyman to pave the way for the injustice of those unjust rulers.

There are some other characters, in the novels, who seem to come out as victims and marginalized. They are those kinds of people who are oppressed by the upper classes and government

Theme of Social Injustice in Three Different Cultures of the 19th and the 20th Centuries Samah Muhammad



authorities without having any chance to be rescued. In *Les Misérables* we have Éponine Thénardières who enjoys a pampered childhood but an impoverished adolescence. After the Thénardières' inn goes bankrupt, Éponine has been taught to steal and cheat. She has been described by Hugo as 'ragged', 'haggard', hoarse voiced due to drinking, and is prematurely aging as a result of living in "debauchery and poverty". In *Great expectations*, Joe Gargery is an example of poor, marginalized ones who have no social class or manner and very little money. Biddy, Mr. Wopsle's great aunt, is another representative of the marginalised class of society. She represents simple, homely virtues among female characters in the novel. Biddy is a person of wisdom. In each of her encounters with Pip, she calculatively makes the definite point that a gentleman is one who tries to fulfil his place in the world and shows consideration to other. In *al-Ard*, we have those poor villagers who represent the lower class (Proletariat). They suffer a lot from class division and the bad treatment from the upper class of society and government authority.

Theme of Social Injustice in Three Different Cultures of the 19th and the 20th Centuries Samah Muhammad

٢٧

Les Misérables, *Great Expectations*, and *al-Ard* present stories about the struggles of the characters who face various kinds of injustice -from those who have money and authority- because they come from poor families. The authors produce images of societies prevalent within their countries and they also provide a critical overview of the rigid social structure at the early nineteenth and twentieth century. They demonstrate the problems of inequality and discrimination that exist with enforcing a firm hierarchical classification system that embraces a new model of social classification which is reliant upon self-determination and the ability to achieve status by actions rather than birth. The time of the authorship of the novels was a period of political and social upheavals in the history of the France, England, and Egypt which deeply affected the authors and their writings. Jean Valjean, Fantine, Cossette, Pip, Magwitch, Joe Gargery, Mrs. Joe, Bidy, Abu Suweilim, Waseefa, and Khadra get bad treatments. They are bullied, and ostracized by the surrounding community. This research demonstrates that it is the behavior of society that encourages criminality among the normal people. We can see that almost all of these characters are proved to be good examples but they are doomed to be crushed by those who have power. They struggle for

Theme of Social Injustice in Three Different Cultures of the 19th and the 20th Centuries **Samah Muhammad**

their survival and combat against those who want to control them for their own advantage.

This research attempts to shed light on one very serious and critical problem that has greatly affected all societies and civilizations for a long time, which is the problem of social injustice. Inequality or injustice means that some groups always have worse opportunities than those of their fellow citizens. Social inequality has some negative consequences on almost all societies. It lessens the effectiveness of social justice and human rights, intensifies conflicts over resources, increases crime rate, poverty, violence..... etc. Joseph Stiglitz (Nobel winning economist) wrote in his book *The Price of Inequality*: "inequality is bad for business, bad for economy, bad for democracies, and bad for society. It is a political choice not an economic necessity". In an interview with the British epidemiologist Richard Wilkinson he said, "what the healthiest societies have in common is not that they have more—more income, more education, or more wealth—but that what they have is more equitably shared."(Jarvis)

Hugo, Dickens, and al-Sharqawi dealt with these problems a long time ago through their works and novels, and realized the

Theme of Social Injustice in Three Different Cultures of the 19th and the 20th Centuries **Samah Muhammad**

growing distance between classes and the effect of that on their societies. They depicted the world where they lived as a strategy to raise the readers' awareness of what was really happening in order to bring social reforms. Poor people, women, and children are their primary concern. They rejected unjust treatment of the poor, abhorred child labor, and despised violence against women. Their depiction of the living condition of the poor supports the idea that they are social moralists who expose the harsh reality of their societies. However, the three novelists came from middle class families, they had a deep sympathy towards the poor, and, through their writings, they sought to bring awareness to the injustices and unbearable living conditions of the poor. They tried to put some solutions to these problems through their works; Hugo in *Les Miserables* tried to resolve some of them when he said:

Solve the two problems (produce wealth and share it), encourage the wealthy, and protect the poor, suppress misery, put an end to the unjust farming out of the feeble by the strong, put a bridle on the iniquitous jealousy of the man who is making his way against the man who has reached the goal, adjust, mathematically and fraternally, salary to labor, mingle gratuitous and compulsory education with the growth of childhood, and make of

Theme of Social Injustice in Three Different Cultures of the 19th and the 20th Centuries Samah Muhammad

۳۰

science the base of manliness, develop minds while keeping arms busy, be at one and the same time a powerful people and a family of happy men, render property democratic, not by abolishing it, but by making it universal, so that every citizen, without exception, may be a proprietor, an easier matter than is generally supposed; in two words, learn how to produce wealth and how to distribute it, and you will have at once moral and material greatness; and you will be worthy to call yourself France.(634)

To conclude, all citizens in a society are equally able to contribute to the well-being of that society, and they are equally able to benefit from their membership within it. On the other hand, when Social injustice occurs, unfair and unjust relations take place between the individuals of that society. This research is an attempt to represent the underprivileged and miserable ones within societies and the social problems that lead them to be kept at a lower level and to show the corrupting influence of wealth and money in modern capitalistic societies.

Works Cited

- Al-Sharqawi, Abd al-Rahman. *Al-Ard*. Dar al-Shorouk, 2008.
(My Translation)
- Burke, Erin. "Imagery in Great Expectations." *Study.com*, Study.com, 2003, [study.com/academy/lesson/imagery-in-great-expectations.html](https://www.study.com/academy/lesson/imagery-in-great-expectations.html).
- Dickens, Charles. *Great Expectations*. Planet Ebook , 2018.
<https://www.planetebook.com/>
- Dickens, Charles. *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*. Fourth Edition. Lea & Blanchard, 1842.
- Hugo, Victor. *Les Misérables*. Translated by the Folio Press, England: Penguin Classics, 1982.
- Jarvis, Brooke. "Why Everyone Suffers in Unequal Societies." *Yes! Magazine*, Yes! Magazine, 5 Mar. 2010.
<https://www.yesmagazine.org/happiness/want-the-good-life-your-neighbors-need-it-too>.
- Lall, Ramji. *Great Expectations : A Critical Study* . Rama Brothers, 2010.
- Martyris, Nina. "Let Them Eat Bread: The Theft That Helped Inspire 'Les Miserables'." *The Salt*. Web. 20 Mar. 2017.
- Stewart, Desmond, translator. *Egyptian Earth*. By Abd al-Rahman al-Sharqawi, Saqibooks, 2005.