

# The Daily Star

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## In Conversation

### 'Sensationalism made Dickens popular . . .'

*This year marks a special moment for literature lovers around the world. With the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall leading the global celebrations of Charles Dickens's 200th birth anniversary in Dickens's birthplace in Portsmouth, fans of Dickens's novels and journals have been observing his works this year with a re-visit to Victorian England.*

*As part of this literature festivity, the Department of English and Humanities of BRAC University invited everyone to a day-long seminar on Charles Dickens's written masterpieces called "Remapping Dickens for the Contemporary World" on June 28.*



**Firdous Azim**

*Under the light of how modern Bangladeshis can find a reflection of our society through Dickens's writings, Ms. **Firdous Azim**, Chairperson of the English Department of BRAC University, talks to **Shayera Moula** of The Daily Star about the aesthetic sparks combined with social realism that Dickens produces so vividly that readers can remain hooked to his literature even today.*

#### **How does reading Charles Dickens allow modern readers to understand our society better?**

That's a difficult question to answer because literature is not really just aimed at understanding society but at the same time there has to be some relevance for the enjoyment of the pleasure in reading to continue. When we read and teach Dickens we often find the relevance staring at us since it is full of the scenes of the streets we see today as we look out the window. His novels reflect the class disparity we experience on a daily basis as well as the gender questions that we are made to negotiate. It is all there even though it was written in Victorian England.

His work is also the first example of popular culture --- attracting a large readership while blending social issues with aesthetic concerns. For the purpose of our students, we recently had posted a passage from *Oliver Twist* on our website and asked students to write stories, essays and take photographs of children on the streets of Dhaka.

The series of stories and photos that were read and on display at the day-long event at BRAC University projected social awareness which really did spring out of the passage from *Oliver Twist*. In the end Dickens's words facilitated discussion on a lot of current issues.

Even a representative from Unicef and a student from the Business School Dept. of BRAC University, presenting an overview of the Empower Energy Project aimed at mainstreaming natural forms of energy, started with quotes from Dickens's novels. Although neither of them was a literature major, they contributed to the day-long seminar at BRAC University on "Remapping Dickens for the Contemporary World" with connections between Dickens and our society, letting us realise that many of the issues that should have been eradicated a long time ago have remained true, unfortunately.

**What did you mean by his work being the 'first example of popular culture and wide readership'?**

Dickens is a 19th century writer which is basically a period where popular culture was *written culture* in the shape of newspapers and novels. Newspapers and journalism had really found their feet in 19th century England, where news was not just reports but also news with views -- features as we know them today. Dickens wrote *Sketches by Boz*, and later was an editor himself. So he was very involved in a scene that attracted readership directly driven by commercial interests. After all, newspapers and journals had to sell in a very competitive market.

The novelist Dickens thus also had to make money through his work and I believe he was very aware of the market for novels and journalism, where he played the market incredibly well. The elements of "Victorianism" that we may find boring today -- the mentality, the tearful death scenes, charitable virtue vs. vice scenes -- were all playing into the gallery as a magnet to his reader's demands.

These stories appeared in a series through journals and newspapers. So we can almost feel that they mirrored what the soap operas of modern times do. His stories would end at a point that would keep readers hooked for the next instalment the following week. The reading scenes, we can imagine, were like TV viewing where the entire family would sit around the fireplace with one person reading aloud. This was a shared middle class pleasure and Dickens pandered to the booming readership of the Victorian setting.

America was also a huge arena of readership for him and the England colonies had access to his work. We know that the rising *bhadrolok* class of Calcutta was an avid part of this global readership.

His work was both entertainment and social critique. As literature students we are made more aware that Victorian England had two nations -- one, a prospering centre and riches of the worlds and the other side, very visible but ignored --the poverty on the streets. So even though Dickens

was not aware of the colonial depredations, he was very conscious of what was happening in his own nation. While enjoying the prosperity of middle-class Britain, he was still disturbed by what lay around him.

England lived with a spectre of revolution with constant industrial unrest and memories of the French Revolution only too visible. In the 1840s Britain had itself witnessed the Charter Movement. The formula of the "Victorian Compromise" can be seen to have arisen out of handling the social contradictions of the age. Victorian compromise in literature often expressed itself through the portrayal of romance, sentimentality, goodness, virtue -- elements that keep the violence at bay.

### **Did Dickens' portrayal of power, politics and poverty have any impact on the social reforms of the time?**

Yes, it did. Maybe not directly but at the time when Dickens was writing, the British Parliament was enacting many laws. The reforms led not to the 8-hr working day but the 12-hr one. The notion of 'overtime' for workers and adequate work for women was also introduced. Issues about children and schooling were also on the rise.

Dickens shared in these concerns and even worked with a home for prostitutes -- referred to as 'fallen' women -- called the Urania Cottage, where he helped troubled women *learn how to* read and write, gain domestic skills, and *have independent sources of income*.

The national growth of such awareness came mainly from newspaper reportage with which Dickens was involved. Parliament itself had sent out people for investigation and finally produced *blue books*-- so if you research on Victorian England, you will be reading their journals, the parliamentary blue books and Dickens.

### **What made his literature unique?**

Sensationalism made his work popular. This element that critics might sneer at has actually made him popular through the ages. He has a fabulous sense of character portrayal -- both serious and as caricatures. They both somewhat appear together and that combination makes him exceptional.

I often feel that we don't get his humour today but in its own time it was potent. But even then when we read his *Great Expectations*, in the way he describes Joe Gargery. The humour has a lot of compassion in it -- the combination of both actually helps draw out the character further.

Mr. Jaggers is, however, described in grotesque proportions which lets the reader be amused yet brings the character to light. John Wemmick, on the other hand, is well divided between his image at work versus at home. The reader gets what essentially are the main elements of the character, and though today we may not laugh out loud as the Victorian readers may have, these portraits convey the kernel of the characters.

**Which modern writers follow Dickens's style today?**

Charles Dickens' equation of realism and romance and gothic was a stock-in-trade of the Victorian genre of novel writing. That said, the *éclat* and the *panache* with which Dickens wrote is difficult to mimic.

Contemporary times are a lot more post-modern in their approach. When we think of the writings of Rushdie, for example, we think of the 18th century and not the 19th. The portrayal of society is not done in a social realist manner, but through magical realism. So social realism may be making a comeback but it does not have the *grotesquety*, almost dark humour, that Dickens was able to portray so well.

Amitav Ghosh is a social realist, but where is the humour or sense of wonder in his work? Dickens has a fantastic blend of realism and magic realism because the disproportions in social portrayals carry you into an unreal world. Magical realist writers can be thought of as Dickens's descendants, and although they wouldn't call themselves that, I would think they do have elements of Dickens in their writing style.

Today's writers mainstream politics whereas Dickens dealt with more social forms of debates. The writer as social protest became much more prominent in the early 20th century, whereas Dickens was more of a social reflector of the politics of his time.

**Which Dickens novel have you constantly gone back to over time and why?**

*Great Expectations*. It tells a story that resonates this journey from the village to the city. This is a very common experience which he tells us through the eyes of a young boy.

In Bangladesh I see all these garments workers and a lot of them have made this journey. It would be wonderful if someone would write a novel based on that experience, perhaps a more sympathetic, compassionate outlook with more feeling.

A lot of my students come from the villages and live in DU or JU hostels. I would love to have someone imaginatively re-create, and I hope one of them someday do, this journey from the country to the city. Even with an easier route to the city these days, it is still a long, difficult journey by a greater mass.

There are lots of stories to be told of this migration and of course Pip comes to a very prosperous ending. But for us the struggle continues in another form or another place. And what you have to become is something that your home back in the village never asked for. So you are struggling, as Pip did, to become another -- in his case a gentleman. You struggle against other odds.

And so I look at all these young girls in our city and simply become wowed at how there are these *Great Expectations* all around us.