
‘THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH’: A STUDY WITH REFERENCE TO WILLIAM BLAKE’S “THE CHIMNEY SWEEPER”

DR. MD. SAHIDUL ISLAM

Abstract: William Blake’s two poems both entitled “The Chimney Sweeper” (published in *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* in 1789 and 1794 respectively) belongs to the Dark phase in literary history when the ‘proletariats’, especially the child labours suffered the most while the bourgeoisie observed the ‘wretched’ conditions of the former with mystified curiosity. The awful conditions of the child labours as depicted in “The Chimney Sweeper” were, in fact, the stark reality in Britain during the late eighteenth and nineteenth century. To the surprise of the readers, people could easily sell their small children to the factory owners at will during that period. In such a social set up mercy seemed to be a distant thought. Despite their delicate physical structure, the children were compelled to work as manual labours. Usually, the children were asked to work in group in order to enhance the efficiency of work. The miserable conditions of the child labours at the chimney captured the attention of the poet greatly and the two poems are the outcome of that influence. To better understand the pitiful conditions of the working class especially the child labours as depicted in “The Chimney Sweeper”, the use of a ‘New Historicist’ literary approach will be of great help in this study.

Keywords: Chimney Sweeper, proletariat, bourgeoisie, child labour, ‘New Historicist’ literary approach.

“It was the best of time, it was the worst of times, it
Was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness,
it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of
Incredibility, it was the season of light, it was the
season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was
the winter of despair.” (Dickens, 3)

With the emergence of science and technology the nation developed, but the human conditions especially the people belonging to the working class in England during the eighteenth century were in great danger. Major English Romantic poets like Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron, William Wordsworth, and John Keats reacted against such materialistic outlook and showed their concern for human society and William Blake is not exceptional.

William Blake’s two poems both entitled “The Chimney Sweeper” (published in *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* in 1789 and 1794 respectively) belongs to the Dark phase in literary history when the ‘proletariats’, especially the child labours suffered the most while the bourgeoisie observed the ‘wretched’ conditions of the former with mystified curiosity. The awful conditions of the child labours as depicted in “The Chimney Sweeper” were, in fact, the stark reality in Britain during the late eighteenth and nineteenth century. To the surprise of the readers, people could easily sell their small children to the factory owners at will during that period. In such a social set up mercy seemed to be a distant thought. Despite their delicate physical structure, the children were compelled to work as manual labours. Usually, the children were asked to work in group in order to enhance the efficiency of work. The miserable conditions of the child labours at the chimney

captured the attention of the poet greatly and the two poems are the outcome of that influence. “Blake had not only observed his contemporary society in disorder and chaos (“The Chimney Sweeper” in *Songs of Experience*) but also tried his level best to establish an uproar against the sufferings of human beings through his poetry”(Buts, 1-2). It was an issue that also informed much of the poetry produced between the 1790s and 1840s that Britain set at intervals throughout his amazingly creative life. Blake had often talked about such serious issues in his poetry as he was conscious about the happenings of his times. In this regard John Beer has aptly said that: “Blake was aware of the ills of his time, but his awareness was always supplemented by a belief that human ills are most surely dealt with by curing the ‘mental’ ills which lie behind them. Dark satanic mills arise in towns because men have dark satanic mills in their minds” (Beer, 6). It is to William Blake’s credit that he does not put forward a simplistic viewpoint on child labour, his thoughts guided by his concern for verisimilitude. It is surely due to his interest in such a noble subject that William Blake’s both the poems as mentioned above address the issues relating to politics and the inhuman attitude of the bourgeoisie class towards the proletariats of the times during which these poems were written. In fact these poems were written in an unusually informative manner.

To better understand the pitiful conditions of the working class especially the child labours as depicted in “The Chimney Sweeper”, the use of a ‘New Historicist’ literary approach will be of great help because: “New historicists acknowledge that they themselves, like all authors, are “subjectivities” that have been shaped and informed by the circumstances

and discourses specific to their era. Hence that their own critical writings in great part construct, rather than discover ready-made, the textual meanings they describe and the literary and cultural histories they narrate" (Abrams, 192). Frantz Fanon's view regarding the exploitation of the 'proletariat' is also obvious in both the poems.

The first half of this study discusses Blake's earlier poem "The Chimney Sweeper" from the *Songs of Innocence*, which is an attempt to look at the miserable existence of the 'subaltern' expressed through the misery of a young chimney sweeper named Tom Dacre, who represents other poor child workers in the poem. It will also be pointed out how Tom's innocence let him remain ignorant about the social injustice he suffers in daily life. The second half of this study, focusing on the poet's latter poem with the same title from the *Songs of Experience*, is concerned with the life of a child chimney sweeper who is stuck in the snow while his parents had gone to the church. The argument will also focus, how, unlike the former poem, the little child in the poem in *Songs of Experience* realises the injustice done to him and speaks against such inhuman social establishments. Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* and 'New Historicist' literary approach, thus, form the theoretical framework in this study. Based on these concepts an attempt has been made in this study to find out the answer of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's most popular question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper". More precisely, it will also be shown as to how the voice of the underdogs remains 'unheard' in both the poems. William Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper" in *Songs of Innocence* asserts an appeal for social justice. Tom Dacre's endurance of repression and the childlike innocence that facilitates him to remain ignorant about the severe conditions and the prevalent injustice in society accounts for his support to the individual voice of the poet. In fact, there emerge a vast contrast between the death, weeping and repression as depicted through the pitiable conditions of Tom Dacre in the poem. He cherishes a pleasant thought in his imagination according to which he is hopeful of entering into the Heaven where his father would take care of him. Tom Dacre, the mouthpiece of the other ignored and poverty-stricken children introduces his personal misfortune at the very starting of the poem. His yearning for the care of his father despite the latter's negligence clearly reflects the former's innocence and ignorance regarding the social injustice. The readers feel sympathetic for Tom because of the latter's innocence being stolen from him against his will. The poet has shared with the readers regarding the sacrifice of Tom Dacre to society according to which

the latter "shaved" off his hair that symbolises lamb's hair. Tom's recounting of the dream in which "thousands of sweepers" were "locked up in coffins of black" (Blake, *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience* 10) clearly indicates the wretched conditions of the chimney sweepers. The sight of the children after they are set free by the angel is also notable:

"Then down a green plain, leaping, laughing, they run
And wash in a river, and shine in the sun." (p.10)

The depiction of the jolly mood of the chimney sweepers is significant in the sense that such happiness generates additional sympathy from the readers as Tom's passionate yearning to be liberated from affliction is further apparent.

At the penultimate stanza of the poem, Tom is asked by the angel in the former's dream to remain "a good boy" so that "he'd have God for his father, & never want joy" (p.10). The readers might believe in that message but momentarily because the pledge seems invalid and unfeasible to carry out as the dishonesty and injustice goes on. The readers would surely get embarrassed if they mirror on the historic way that the influential would use to take benefit of the powerless only because of the latter's lower social rank and for being economically unsound. One may recall and find out from the ashes of history how the dishonest and corrupt leaders used to cheer the weak and unprotected with a purpose to enforce their own repression and admit the tyranny of those in control. In fact, Blake's tendency in the last stanza of "The Chimney Sweeper" in *Songs of Innocence* clearly reflects that the poet does not want to ponder over the authenticity of the message of the previous stanza. He concentrates on the factual significance of the poem. The lack of rhyme scheme in the last stanza of the poem unlike the previous stanzas where the rhyme scheme follows the plain melodic pattern aa, bb, hints at the poet's proclamation of a message that the readers can hardly defy. It demonstrates a sudden return to the stark realities away from Tom Dacre's world of fantasy. The words like "dark" and "work" (p.10) in the last stanza emphasis the ending of lively imagery and cheerfulness of Tom respectively. Through the use of these words and the other words in the poem like "coffins of black" (p.10), the poet depicts the harsh condition of Tom. Through such words and expressions the poet appeals for Tom and other children who share the same fate so that they might not be deprived from social justice. However, the poet has created a tricky situation through the use of two words at the end of the last two sentences of the poem such as "warm" and "harm" (p.10). Though these words seem to have rhymed but the sound varies.

The unrhymed last stanza adds more poignancy and

mirrors the universal theme in life that outward shows often don't reveal truth. Undoubtedly, Tom enjoys the momentary comfort after getting the angel's message. But does it provide any solution as to how Tom could overcome the problems of life? In a society where the poor children and underdogs are looked down upon, Tom has hardly any option to get rid of the injustice. His naive expectation may facilitate Tom with temporary pleasure but he cannot escape the effects of his pathetic condition.

Again it is due to the unrhymed scheme of the last stanza of "The Chimney Sweeper" in *Songs of Innocence* that enables the readers to come to a sound conclusion regarding the promise of the angel and Tom Dacre's longing for freedom. Though it is beyond Tom's reach to comprehend the naked reality of this earth due to his innocence, but Blake has understood the former's deplorable condition. Keeping in mind the pitiful plight of Tom as well as the other fellows of similar fate the poet pleads for a change in the society.

So far as the "The Chimney Sweeper" from the *Songs of Experience* is concerned, it also imparts similar kind of message like the poem in the *Songs of Innocence* but with a different structure. William Blake depicts the plight of the chimney sweepers more clearly in the *Songs of Experience* than the poet had done in the poem in *Songs of Innocence*, which justifies the title of the two books in which these two poems had been published. In the earlier poem Tom Dacre endures inflictions and shed tears but fail to realize the cause behind it. Contrarily, the child (whom I will address as 'he' in the rest of my discussion) in the latter poem does not remain innocent. In fact, he too weeps like Tom but the former unlike the latter comprehends the intricacy and despondency of his condition and is talented enough to examine and deal with his circumstances. One may raise question regarding Tom Dacre's ability if he could continue life in a society where injustice is the order of the day. However, the point of view of the child in "The Chimney Sweeper" from the *Songs of Experience* is the answer to such question applied in case of Tom. He is no longer a naive and does not believe in the promise assured in the poem in the *Songs of Innocence*. Though he is a child but has insight which surpasses his age. It is evident through his understanding of the intricate situations faced by the marginalized people including himself and the subsequent powerful articulation against such social injustice. Despite less number of imagery, reveries, oaths and fantasy scenes for the poem being short, "The Chimney Sweeper" from the *Songs of Experience* remains unaffected so far as the realistic nature of it is concerned. The message conveyed in the poem is simple and balanced. In order to maintain it; William

Blake has used the rhyme scheme in the poem with a little variation. In the first stanza the child narrates his present condition whereas in the second stanza he recalls the past. The third and final stanza is the continuation of the current situation.

While imparting the message regarding the liberation of the child labours from their wretched conditions in "The Chimney Sweeper" in *Songs of Experience*, William Blake has vividly shown the contrast between the nameless child of this poem and Tom Dacre of the poem in *Songs of Innocence*. Unlike Tom and his parents, who are the victims of society, the separation of the child from the parents in *Songs of Experience* is caused neither due to the oppression of the tyrants nor death. In this case the child's parents have openly neglected and exploited him. The poet, therefore, wants to create awareness about the suffering of the disadvantaged and those on top exploiting people they have authority over. He wants people to show sympathy to the children of that calibre also. According to the poet, it is possible to eradicate the child labour if the people show more concern, avoid duplicity and do not misuse their influence. This is what the poet urges to the people of the society which is echoing throughout the poem.

Another striking aspect to be noted in "The Chimney Sweeper" from the *Songs of Experience* is that while certain human beings are causing harm to their fellow being, nature provides peace. In fact, the nature can neither show sympathy to the child nor can relieve his pain decisively. But at the same time nature does not purposefully inflict the child with pain. The child in this poem has learnt to tackle and come across comfort amid the cold snow as if he is used to it. However, William Blake does not digress from the subject of his major concern that is the problems of the child labours. The poet keeps alive the interests of the readers throughout the poem through his focus on the people who suffer for being wretched of the earth.

In "The Chimney Sweeper" from the *Songs of Experience*, William Blake emphasises on the fact that the outward appearance of one may deceive others. For instance, there are people in the society who seem to lead an upright and pious life but at the cost of other people. Are they really righteous people? The poet has categorically hinted at those so called honourable people to shed off their hypocritical attitudes to build a better society. In "The Chimney Sweeper" from the *Songs of Experience* the parents have ignored the responsibility towards their child who is stuck amid the snow. Instead of showing their care and love for the child the parents have abandoned him to attain religious institution at the expense of the child's troubles:

"And because I am happy & dance & sing,

They think they have done me no injury,
And are gone to praise God & his Priest & King,
Who made up a heaven of our misery" (Blake, *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience* 35)

The poet tries to give an authentic insight into the people's deeds and its impact on others around them through the use of the words like "say", "pray"; "sing", "king"; "injury" and "misery" as quoted above. This is how William Blake has shown the shocking outlook of the dominant according to which the cleric and monarch who spends a luxurious life for themselves but at the cost of others wretchedness.

However, the contrast between the behaviour of the child and his actual feeling is obvious in "The Chimney Sweeper" in the *Songs of Experience*. The child tries to show through his jolly mood, singing and dancing that he is happy at his condition and does not bother for others care. But, through such blind acceptance of his condition, the child is merely hiding his helplessness. He doesn't understand that to remain content to his plight means confinement of his free thoughts. It is due to his bold attitude towards life that his parents take the advantage of him. It keeps the child in illusion that his parents are not causing any harm to him in spite of the fact that the latter have intentionally put more burdens on the former. The suffering of the child due to the negligence of his parents is echoed through the very opening stanza of the poem in *Songs of Experience*:
"A little black thing among the snow,

Crying "weep! 'weep," in notes of woe!"
"Where are thy father & mother? Say?"
"They are both gone up to the church to pray" (p.35).

In fact, the circumstances compel the child to feel himself as insignificant. And his parents are solely responsible for it because:

"They clothed me in the clothes of death, And taught me to sing the notes of woe" (p.35).

It clearly shows that the life of the child in "The Chimney Sweeper" in *Songs of Experience* is grasped by misery. Instead of being brought up properly and taken care of he is neglected. Death not only encompasses him but also becomes a component of his self. It deprives him of his joy. Wretchedness becomes everything for him.

After a thorough study of William Blake's two lyric poems having the same title "The Chimney Sweeper" from the *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* respectively, it is noticeable that the poet purposefully wants a change in society for better human condition. Contrary to the neo-classical tradition which did not regard the peasants as being important, William Blake like the other Romantic poets felt the opposite. He describes the two opposed conditions of the human psyche in the two poems with great interest but vehemently condemns the aristocrats as tyrants and exploiters. This is how society is better represented in Blake's poetry in particular and in English literature in general.

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Assistant Professor, Department of English, B.S. Abdur Rahman University,
Vandalur, Chennai-600048, Email: sahido8@rediffmail.com