

Representation of Social Inequality in Oliver Goldsmith's Works

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Abstract

The eighteenth century was a period of noteworthy social, economic and political revolution in England. These changes brought prosperity to some segments of society while at the same time increasing poverty, dislocation and social inequality among others. Oliver Goldsmith, one of the most notable literary figures of the period appeared as a strong observer of these social realities. Through his poetry, fiction and drama Goldsmith represented the hardships of the poor section of the society and criticized economic mistreatment and exposed the artificial differences created by class hierarchy. His major works, including *The Deserted Village*, *The Vicar of Wakefield* and *She Stoops to Conquer* offer valued insights into the nature and consequences of social inequality in eighteenth-century Britain. This paper examines Goldsmith's representation of social inequality, analyzing his treatment of class separations, economic injustice, rural dislocation, social mobility, and moral exploitation. The study further argues that Goldsmith's evaluation of social inequality remains appropriate in contemporary society where issues of economic discrepancy and social elimination continue to challenge human welfare.

Keywords: Oliver Goldsmith, Social Inequality, Social Realism, Class Distinction, Economic Disparity, Humanism, Eighteenth-Century Literature.

Introduction

Well as we all know that Literature has often functioned as a influential medium for reflecting social realities and questioning existing structures of power. Many writers have used their works to draw attention to the conditions of downgraded groups and to expose inequalities within society. Among the eighteenth-century English writers, Oliver Goldsmith occupies a special position due to his humanitarian outlook and deep concern for social justice. Goldsmith lived during a period marked by fast economic progress, urbanization, and agricultural revolution. While these developments contributed to national wealth, they also broadened the gap between the rich and the poor. Rural communities faced dislocation, and social movement remained limited. The attentiveness of wealth among a privileged minority often resulted in the disregarding of ordinary people. Unlike many contemporary writers who celebrated economic progress, Goldsmith focused on its human consequences. His works reveal sympathy for the poor and criticism of social organizations that privileged wealth over humanity. Through realistic portrayals of everyday life, he exposed the inequalities surrounded in eighteenth-century society. This paper seeks to explore how Goldsmith represented social inequality in his major works and how his literary vision continues to resonate in the modern world.

As we all know that Oliver Goldsmith was a very kind hearted fellow. He knows the condition of the poor very well. Here I would like to quote from his poem 'The Deserted Village, on the irreplaceable value of the working class:

“Princes and lords may flourish, or may fade;

A breath can make them, as a breath has made;

But a bold peasantry, their country's pride,

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When once destroyed, can never be supplied.”

To understand Goldsmith's treatment of social difference, it is important to examine the historical context in which he wrote. The eighteenth century witnessed thoughtful financial and social changes- Expansion of profitable capitalism, Growth of urban centres, Agricultural reforms and enclosure movements, Increased attentiveness of land ownership, Appearance of a wealthy middle class, Persistent poverty among labourers and peasants.

The enclosure movement changed common lands into private property, forcing many rural families to abandon traditional livelihoods. Industrial and commercial growth enriched landlords and traders while many ordinary workers remained economically helpless. Class differences became increasingly noticeable. Wealth and social status often determined opportunities, influence, and uprightness. These conditions provided the social background against which Goldsmith developed his critique of inequality. Goldsmith's writings are deeply rooted in humanitarian values. He consistently expressed concern for people affected by poverty, displacement, and social elimination. Unlike purely political reformers, Goldsmith approached social issues from a moral and humanistic outlook. He believed that extreme pursuit of wealth damaged sympathy, community, and social harmony. His literature emphasizes- Human dignity, Social responsibility, Moral integrity, Sympathy for the disadvantaged, Criticism of greediness and materialism. These principles shape his representation of social inequality throughout his works. Rural Movement and Economic Inequality in *The Deserted Village* is perhaps Goldsmith's most powerful critique of social inequality. The poem describes the decline of the fictional village of Auburn, once a wealthy rural community characterized by simplicity, happiness, and mutual support. Goldsmith contrasts the village's past prosperity with its present unhappiness. Wealthy landowners obtain increasing amounts of land, while ordinary villagers are forced to leave their homes. Criticism of Land attentiveness. One of the central themes of the poem is the attentiveness of wealth and property. Goldsmith argues that when land and possessions become controlled by a small elite, the broader community suffers. Economic inequality destroys social stability and creates prevalent hardship. The famous line:

"I'll fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,

Where wealth accumulates, and men decay."

captures Goldsmith's concern that economic prosperity can coexist with human suffering.

The villagers are displaced from their homes and forced to seek uncertain future elsewhere. This displacement reflects wider social realities of eighteenth century England where many rural inhabitants lost admittance to land and employment. Goldsmith portrays migration not as opportunity but as tragedy, highlighting the emotional and social costs of uprooted people. The destruction of Auburn represents the fading of traditional values, community bonds and social equality. Goldsmith presents rural society as a space where human relations are valued more than material wealth. *The Vicar of Wakefield* explores social inequality through the understanding of the Primrose family. The novel depicts how economic situations influence social status and personal relations. Dr. Primrose's family experiences financial ruin and social deterioration. Their changing fortunes reveal the uncertainty of social position in a society where wealth controls respectability. Goldsmith determines how individuals without economic power become helpless to mistreatment and humiliation. Throughout the novel, characters are commonly judged according to their financial condition rather than their moral appeal. Goldsmith criticizes a society that values appearance, property and social rank more than virtue.

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Many wealthy characters display egocentricity, arrogance, and moral corruption. In contrast financially struggling characters often exhibit honesty, generosity and flexibility. This contrast challenges orthodox expectations regarding wealth and moral superiority. *She Stoops to Conquer* addresses social inequality through satire and comedy. The play reflects the silliness of class consciousness and social affectation. Characters repeatedly form opinions about others based on expectations regarding social status. These misunderstandings generate comic situations while at the same time criticizing class partiality. Goldsmith mocks individuals who seek prestige through displays of wealth and refinement. The play suggests that genuine worth should be measured by character rather than social position. By upsetting expectations and exposing false expectations, Goldsmith questions the rightfulness of rigid social hierarchies. His comedy ultimately promotes equality, sincerity, and mutual respect. Goldsmith consistently shows sympathy for marginalized groups. His literary depictions of poverty differ from those of many contemporary writers because he avoids portraying the poor as morally lower. Instead he emphasizes their humanity and dignity. Poor characters are shown as individuals with emotions, ambitions and moral worth. This approach challenges stereotypes that associate poverty with personal failure. Goldsmith often suggests that poverty results from social and economic systems rather than individual limitations. This perspective get ahead modern sociological understandings of inequality. The suffering of the poor serves as an impeachment of social structures that line up profit over people. Goldsmith implies that society bears joint responsibility for addressing inequality. A repeated theme throughout Goldsmith's writings is criticism of materialism. The search of wealth frequently leads to Social division, Loss of moral values, Exploitation of helpless groups, Weakening of community associations.

Goldsmith does not reject wealth itself but criticizes the excessive chase of economic gain at the expense of human welfare. His works advocate a balanced society where economic development is guided by ethical contemplations. Although Goldsmith precedes the great realist novelists of the nineteenth century, his works exhibit important characteristics of social realism. Goldsmith carefully observes everyday life and social conditions. His works centre on villagers, families, travellers and common citizens rather than entirely upper-class figures. Goldsmith highlights the impact of economic and political classifications on individual lives. His literature inspires readers to reproduce on questions of justice and social responsibility. These qualities launch him as an important predecessor to later realist writers. The issues Goldsmith addressed remain remarkably related today. Modern societies continue to experience increasing differences between wealthy privileged and economically disadvantaged people. Urbanization, development projects and globalization often result in displacement similar to that depicted in *The Deserted Village*. Marginalized communities continue to face hindrances related to education, employment, healthcare and social involvement. Goldsmith's critique of materialism echoes in contemporary societies subjugated by consumerism and economic rivalry. His writings remind modern readers that economic progress must be go together with social justice and human welfare. Oliver Goldsmith's works provide a deep and durable critique of social inequality. Through *The Deserted Village*, *The Vicar of Wakefield* and *She Stoops to Conquer* he exposes the consequences of economic inequality, class partiality, rural displacement and social elimination. His literature reveals deep compassion for ordinary people and a strong commitment to human dignity.

Goldsmith's depiction of social inequality spreads beyond historical documentation; it offers a moral account of societies that line up wealth over humanity. His works challenge readers to recognize the human costs of economic and social injustice while confirming the importance of consideration, equality, and community. In the contemporary world, where inequality remains one of the most demanding global concerns, Goldsmith's

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literary vision continues to provide valuable insights into the association between social structures and human well-being. His writings remain a powerful reminder that true progress must be measured not only by wealth but also by the welfare and dignity of all members of society.

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