

Fiction as Social History: A Study of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* as a History from the Other Side

Harsh Bhardwaj

Research Scholar

Department of English and Cultural Studies

Panjab University, Chandigarh

Abstract: The early twentieth century marked the beginning of the dominance of America on the world scene. It was the period when the USA recovering from its post civil-war trauma supplanted the chaos with the notion of the “American dream.” This idea encompasses a rosy picture where America becomes a land of dreaming spires, where one’s fortunes see a dramatic shift over a short period of time. Consequently, thousands of people immigrated to America to have better opportunities but their hopes and lives were shattered when they got into the nasty terrain of capitalism. The novel, *The Jungle*, by Upton Sinclair serves as a text that not only unveils and attacks the vagueness of the American dream but also brings forth the evil face of industrial capitalism through its vivid description of inhuman conditions of the working class, especially the immigrants. It played a role of journalistic importance, besides portrayal of human pathos and communist propaganda. It was instrumental in the passage of the Meat Inspection Act and the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, which established the Bureau of Chemistry that would become the Food and Drug Administration in 1930. The paper studies how *The Jungle* as fiction plays the role of presenting history from the other side by focusing on the lower strata of society, which exposes the vanity underneath the idea of the American dream.

Keywords: American dream, socialism, social activism.

As my sufferings mounted I soon realized that there were two ways in which I could respond to my situation--either react with bitterness or seek to transform the suffering into a creative force. I decided to follow the latter course.

-- Martin Luther King, Jr.

The aforesaid statement underscores the idea that qualms of adversity can be transformed into a potent force which can bring revolutionary changes in a social system. This latent force for the sake of multitudes gets manifested in the form of social activism. This paper studies Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* written in 1905 as marginalized history as well as how a text became a creative force to bring forth social activism. It examines how certain symbols of capitalist progress have been used to lambast exploitative capitalism itself. Lastly, it seeks to understand as far as social activism is concerned, how *The Jungle* was a misfire. Upton Sinclair's novel, *The Jungle* presents the social and economic plight of the meatpacking workers by the capitalist society in every walk of life. The workers are not only marginalized in terms of economy and social status, but they also fall prey to con-men who rob their hard earned money as they cannot rob the rich because of the higher social status and political power of the former. The novel underlines poverty, the absence of social programmes, unpleasant living and working conditions, and the despair prevalent among the working class, which is contrasted with the deep-rooted corruption and exploitation on the part of those in power. Sinclair presents before the American public, the state of affairs in the meatpacking industry, beckoning that something must be done to do away with the prevailing system of "wage slavery" (Young 467). This novel served as a tool of social criticism, presenting a history which remained ignored under the aegis of capitalist class rule. Not for nothing do Marxist critics of the Frankfurt School like Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer laud modernist writers such as James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Samuel Beckett for the way they fragment or disrupt social structure by yielding a "negative knowledge" of the dehumanizing institutions and social processes under capitalism (Abrams 149).

The story of *The Jungle* is about a Lithuanian man Jurgis Rudkus and his extended family, who emigrate from their homeland to the United States of America to make a fortune and fulfil their aspirations, and wipe out all misery and squalor from their lives. But the harsh working conditions and his socio-economic exploitation made him lose even his meagre possessions. One of the novel's central criticisms of capitalism is that it has a destructive effect on the institution of family. In their hope of owning a house, the family falls victim to a loan scheme that robs them of all their savings in payment of a house in a slum that is out of their reach. The family enters such a state of financial crisis that one by one, all the family members . . . the women, Jurgis's sick father, and even the young children have to find jobs in order to contribute to their meagre family income. Jurgis's father gets a job only after agreeing to pay another man one-third

of his wages for helping him obtain the job. The job is too hard for his old age; it quickly takes a toll on his health, and kills him. Ona's pregnancy makes a job difficult for her. Ona's supervisor, Miss Henderson runs a prostitution ring, and most of the female factory workers are forced to be prostitutes. Ona gives birth to a boy, but she has to return to work a week later which ruins her health to a great extent. An injury results in the loss of his job for Jurgis, and circumstances force him to work in a fertilizer plant where the chemicals affect his skin making his own odour unbearable to him. Family children die of food poisoning and Rudkus's wife is raped by her boss, making her job dependent on her giving him sexual favours. Jurgis violently confronts him in revenge, leading to his arrest, unfair trial, and imprisonment by the bribed judge. On his return, he finds Ona dying of premature labour in her second childbirth because Jurgis is unable to pay money for a doctor. All these incidents thwart the then popular idea of the "American Dream" by exposing its hollowness through the plight of the Lithuanian family in the narrative. It is shown that America is indeed a land of aspirations and ambitions, but only for the industrial capitalist class who pile up their fortunes on the miseries of the working class.

The novel also stresses the idea of "lost childhood" in the American working class when the USA posed itself as the most equal and just society in the world. The childhood for the upper-class children was beautiful and promising. For the working classes, it was no better than a slavery system into which they had to sink out of need, unlike the blacks in the nineteenth century who were forced by an overt system. The death of Stanislovas Lukoszas, Teta Elzbieta's son, presents an extremely deteriorated state of being for the factory workers' children. He is thirteen years old in age and often has to bear frost bites at the workplace. One night he accidentally gets locked in a store-room of the factory and is eaten alive by the rats. Similarly, when Kristofonas, Elzbieta's crippled son, dies; the family is relieved of an unproductive member who would have been a burden on the family. The drowning of Jurgis's son Antanas in a muddy street displays the pitiable condition of livelihood in the vicinity of the lower class quarters.

The title of the novel symbolizes the competitive and opportunistic nature of capitalism. The socio-economic ambience of Packingtown in Chicago is like a Darwinian jungle in which the strong prey on the weak and all living beings are engaged in a cut-throat fight for survival. The

title draws attention specifically to the doctrine of Social Darwinism, an idea used by some nineteenth-century thinkers to justify the abuses of wealthy capitalists. It justified the social and economic gap between various classes as the natural order. This idea essentially held that the social system was designed to reward the strongest and ablest people, while the unsuccessful and the lowly people were kept at an inferior level. By relating the story of a group of honest, hardworking immigrants who are destroyed by corruption and evil, Sinclair tries to rebut the idea of Social Darwinism, implying that those who succeed in the capitalist system are not the best of the human resource but rather can be the worst and most corrupt of all.

The primary target of the novel is the evil system of capitalism. Sinclair considers it as destructive, violent, and inhuman; reducing a human being to a mere cog in the wheel of production. The slow annihilation of Jurgis's family at the hands of the cruel economic and socio-political system exemplifies the effect of capitalism on the working class as a whole. As the immigrants who have a strong belief in the concept of American Dream, which promises life of fortune for all those who invest hard work in this land of aspirations, Jurgis landed with his extended family in America but life becomes progressively torturous for them; bringing them to a state of utter despair. He intends to universalize the evil consequences of capitalism on humankind at large, by underlining in the novel every negative effect of capitalism on society.

Sinclair views socialism as the cure for all the maladies brought into the system by the epidemic called capitalism. The socialist ideology is introduced in the book in chapter 28 of the novel, paving a way free from the sufferings and torments of capitalism. He wages a political attack on capitalism, and persuades the readers to strive for the socialist alternative. Socialism is shown to be in a binary opposition to capitalism; whereby capitalism destroys the majority of the population for the benefit of a few, socialism works for advancement of the whole society. It is even depicted in the novel that a true Christian faith can flourish only in a socialist state. Every aspect of the novel's plot, characterization, and conflict is designed to discredit the capitalist political system and illustrate the ability of a socialist political system to restore humane social justice to the downtrodden, exploited, and abused working class. Thus, the novel also turns out to be a gospel of socialism.

The novel consists of some vital symbols which at an abstract level signify the crude and gruesome reality of human life. The most significant symbols in the novel are the animal pens

and slaughterhouses of Packingtown, which explicitly represent in a shocking way the plight of the working class. Just as the animals at Packingtown are herded into pens, killed without mercy, made to suffer, and given no choice about their fate, so is the fate of the thousands of poor immigrant workers forced to enter the pyre of the meatpacking industry, which grinds them brutally and kills them without giving them any choice. Sinclair uses the cans of rotten and unhealthy meat to represent the essential corruption of capitalism and the hypocrisy of the American Dream. The cans have shiny, attractive surfaces but contain a mass of putrid meat unfit for human consumption. In the same way, American capitalism presents an attractive face to immigrants, but the America that they find is rotten and corrupt. The dismal state of the meatpacking business is underlined by the following excerpt from the fourteenth chapter of the novel, which exposes the unhygienic conditions in which the business takes place:

[T]he meat would be shoveled into carts, and the man who did the shoveling would not trouble to lift out a rat even when he saw one—there were things that went into the sausage in comparison with which a poisoned rat was a tidbit. There were the butt-ends of smoked meat, and the scraps of corned beef, and all the odds and ends of the waste of the plants, that would be dumped into old barrels in the cellar and left there. Under the system of rigid economy which the packers enforced, there were some jobs that it only paid to do once in a long time, and among these was the cleaning out of the waste barrels. Every spring they did it; and in the barrels would be dirt and rust and old nails and stale water—and cartload after cartload of it would be taken up and dumped into the hoppers with fresh meat, and sent out to the public's breakfast. (334)

The novel aimed at transformation in the working and living conditions of workers in American industries, but historically it caused a public outcry over the novel's portrayal of the meat industry's practice of selling rotten and diseased meat to unsuspecting consumers (Young 473). This novel led to the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act in 1906, which advocated for a hygienic environment in the food manufacturing industries (Young 476). Sinclair was not much pleased by the social response to the novel, although it was largely successful in commercial terms. The writer's mission in the novel was to strive for the workers' rights, but the public responded selfishly by voicing their concerns for their own health, pure food, and hygiene. It shows how the hegemonic state apparatus created a middle class which was

capitalist in temperament, driven by economic and personal interests. Besides, in the United States of America of the early twentieth century, the management norms were guided by the principles of the then prevalent management theory of Taylorism. It considered a worker as an economic man, who is solely motivated by the desire for money. The maximization of work was the chief goal of the managers, without even considering for the social well-being of the workers. Taylor was against the concept of a trade union, and considered it as a hindrance in the process of industrial production and hence in economic development. So, Taylorism had its impact upon the American capitalists, making them more economic in temperament rather than humane.

All this made Sinclair a strong votary of a socialist ideological revolution in his career as a politician. Another important issue that is significant is the solution posed by the novel to the problem of workers through socialist parties and labour unions. The United States of America, being a capitalist nation was averse to anything having a tinge of socialism or communism. It is testified from the fact that the demand for labour unions was publically supported when raised as a vital issue by the Democratic Party, while the same plea under a socialist garb could not even receive average public response. Owing to the socialist agenda raised in the novel, most of the American critics labelled it as political fiction, therefore diluting its primary message which was in favour of the well-being of workers. This shows how socio-political forces apart from production also influence reception of a text.

As far as the question of suggestion of socialism as a solution to this problem is concerned, socialism cannot be a remedy to this social malady. Even in socialist countries, social ownership of property exists only in name. Under socialism, the workers have faced similar plight as under capitalism. Socialism has led to over-regulation and curbs one's independent zeal to grow. An ideal system would be one which would not affect the individual liberty, at the same time maintaining social equity. Thus, literature is the source of oppositional values, whereby it uses either the traces of what Raymond Williams calls "residual" culture or the "emergent" values to thwart the dominant ideology of the upper classes prevalent in the society (Berry 184). Therefore, a historical study should be conducted after taking into consideration multiple perspectives on a subject. Despite being largely textual, this mode of criticism can trace the past, which can at larger levels give rise to an oppositional culture, leading to social activism for affirmation of their identities.

Works Cited and Consulted

- Abrams, M.H., Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009.
- Allen, John. *Homelessness in American Literature: Romanticism, Realism, and Testimony*. Routledge, 2004, pp. 22-28.
- Arthur, Anthony. *Radical Innocent: Upton Sinclair*. Random House, 2006, pp. 45-48, 71-73, 82-85, 130-33.
- Bhattacharya, Mohit. *New Horizons of Public Administration*. Jawahar Publications, 2003.
- Brinkley, Alan. "Industrial Supremacy." *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People*, McGrawHill, 2008, pp. 426-44.
- Heuvel, Katrina V. *The Nation, 1865-1990*. Thunder's Mouth P, 1992, p. 80.
- Olsson, Karen. "Welcome to *The Jungle*: Does Upton Sinclair's Novel Hold Up?" *Slate*. 2006.
- Sears, Barry. "Afterword." *The Jungle*. By Upton Sinclair, Signet, 2001, pp. 343-47.
- Sinclair, Upton. "The Condemned-Meat Industry: A Reply to Mr. M. Cohn Armour." *Everybody's Magazine*, vol. XIV, 1906, pp. 611-13.
- Sinclair, Upton. *The Jungle*. Infobase Publishing, 2002, pp. 4-5, 10-11.
- Sinclair, Upton. *Upton Sinclair: The Autobiography of Upton Sinclair*. Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962.
- Young, J.H. "The Pig That Fell into the Privy: Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and the Meat Inspection Amendments of 1906." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, vol. 59, no. 4, 1985, pp. 467-80.